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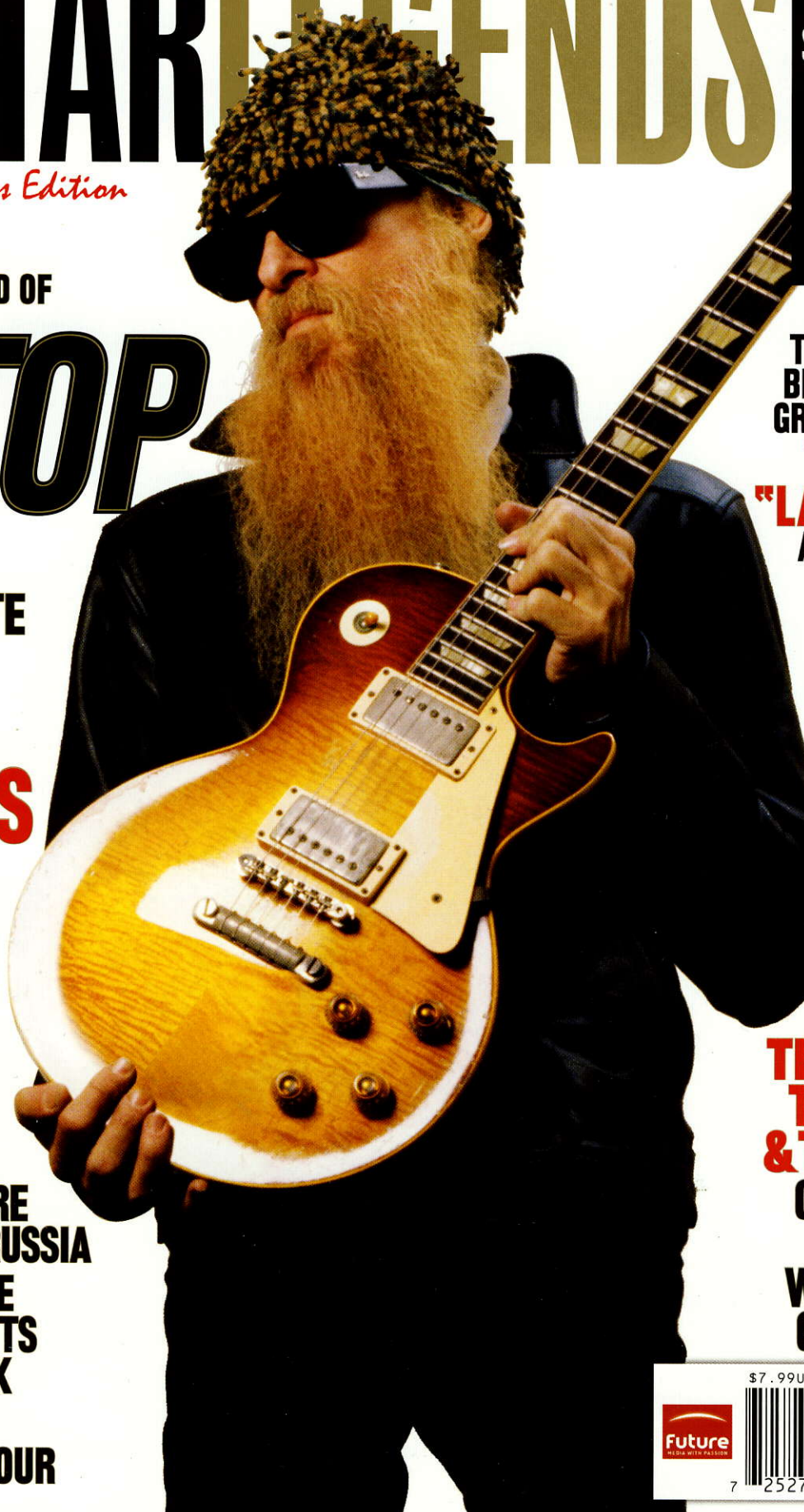

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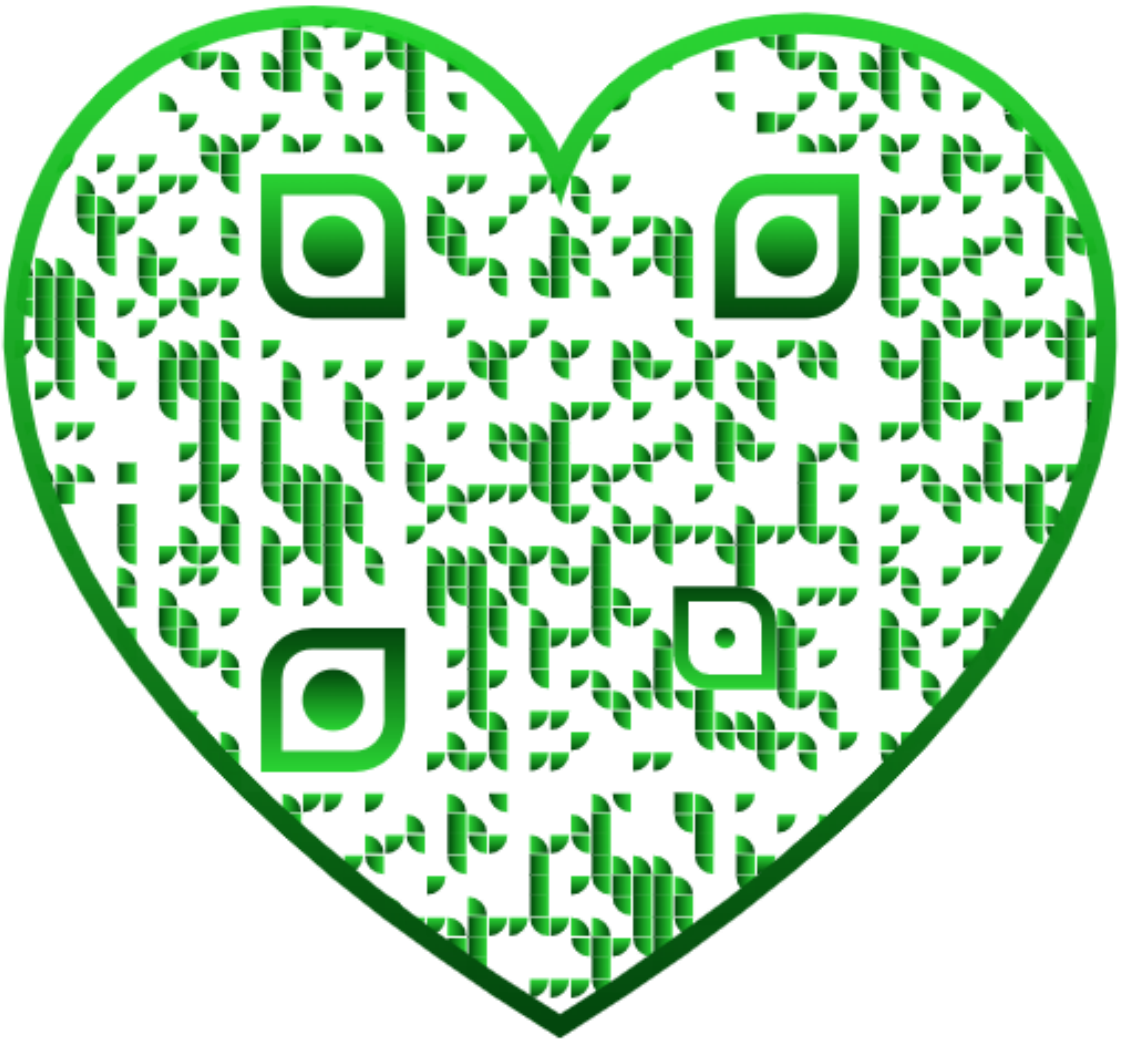

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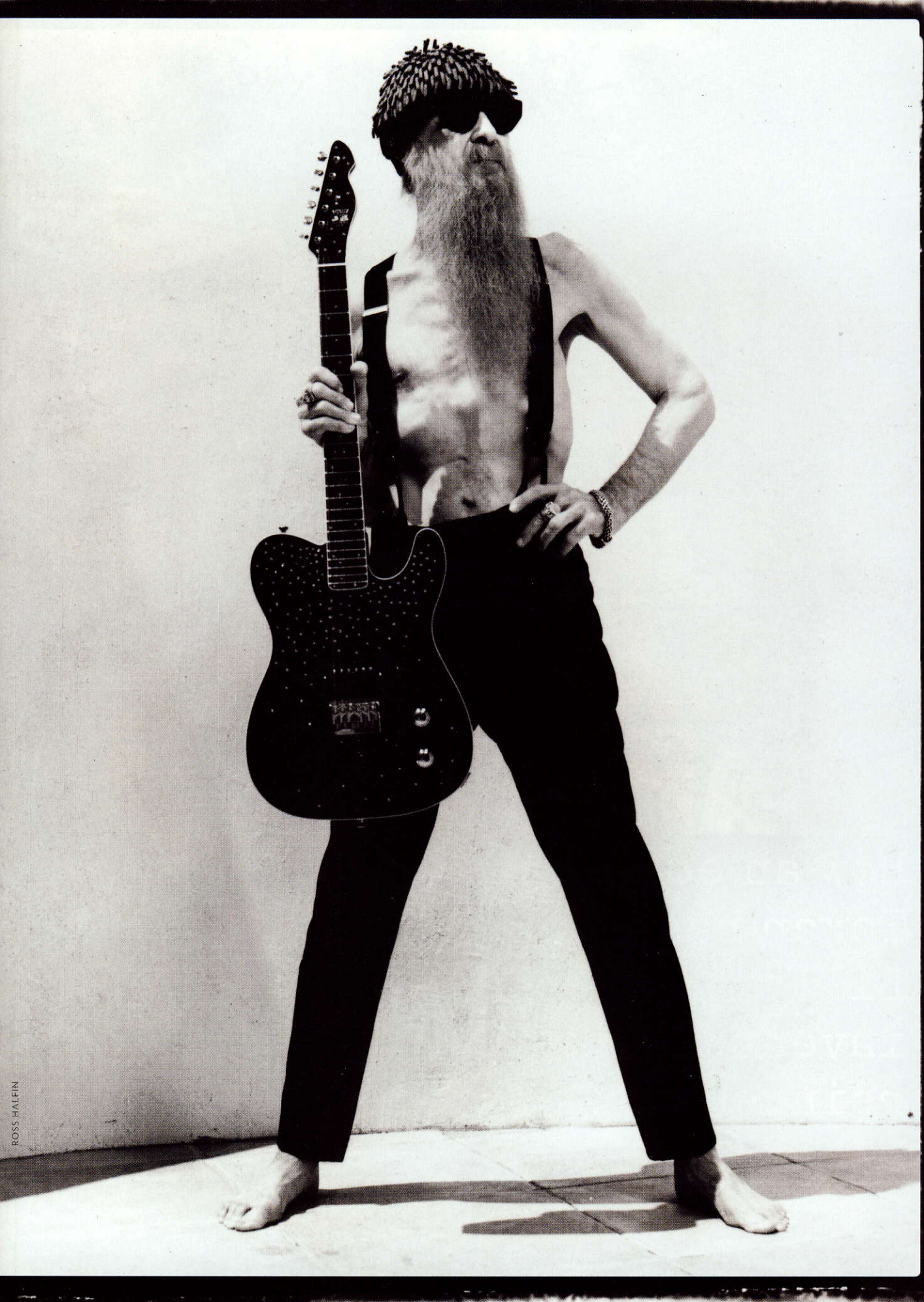

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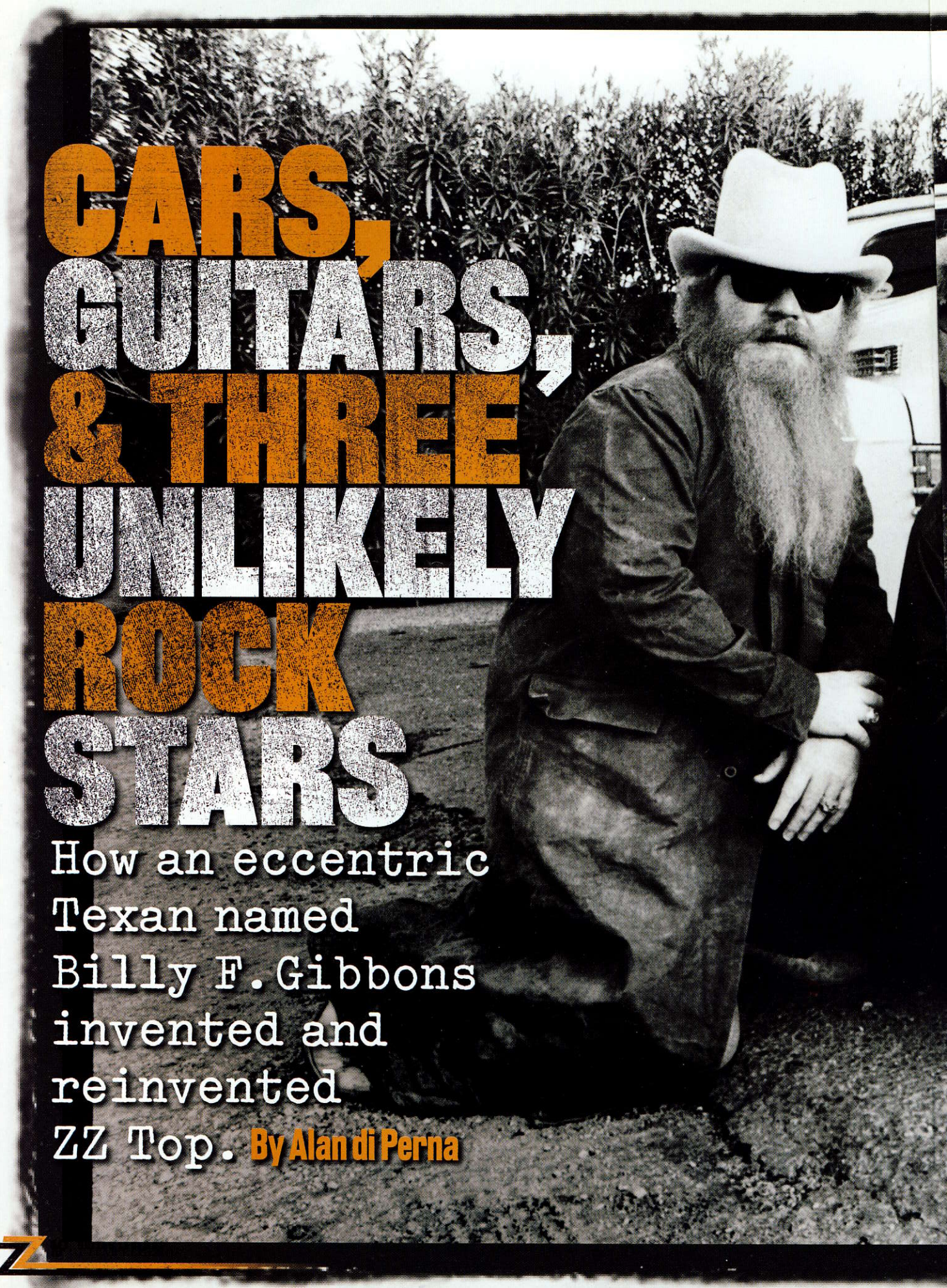


CARS, GUITARS, & THREE UNLIKELY ROCK STARS

How an eccentric Texan named Billy F. Gibbons invented and reinvented ZZ Top. By Alan di Perna

(from left) Dusty Hill, Frank Beard and Billy Gibbons on the *El Loco* tour, Phoenix, Arizona, 1981

ROSS HALFIN

ZZ TOP

guitarist and mastermind Billy Gibbons is a compulsive shopper. Late one recent Hollywood night he could be found prowling the aisles of the Virgin Megastore on Sunset Boulevard, moving stealthily like some African tribal huntsman, albeit one with a long grey beard, strange tufted hat, natty black suit, ample silver wrist jewelry and a white shirt accentuating the night-owl pallor of that small portion of his face left visible by his legendary chin warmer and bizarre headgear. The Great White Hunter! He swoops down the aisles, deftly picks through stacks of CDs and extracts the discs that capture his fancy: a collection of cuts by Fifties steel guitar legend Speedy West, some Los Lobos albums to prepare for a jam with the famed L.A. band at the Latin Grammys, and a worldbeat compilation for the missus, the comely actress Gilligan, who is approximately half Billy's age. "She goes crazy for this stuff," he confides.

For me he selects a CD by country star Brad Paisley, a new friend of Billy's, whom he rates pretty highly as a guitarist. Next, Mr. Gibbons roots through the bargain bin, commenting authoritatively on tacky but obscure disco tracks that maybe he ought not admit to knowing so well. Then it's on to the DVD racks. Billy's craving some film noir tonight, that ominous, black-and-white, B-movie genre, filled with razor-sharp killers, dangerous gun molls and other desperate characters from the fringes of mid–20th century American society. Billy digs and digs, growing visibly frustrated. He can't find one he hasn't already seen, but he does present me with a copy of *Dillinger*, quite possibly the only film noir *I've* never seen.

Billy's knowledge of film is as encyclopedic as his command of musical idioms both high and low. Just name a cinematic genre: vintage Hollywood, Italian neorealism, Sixties kitsch, Asian slasher flicks... Billy can name directors, cinematographers, minor actors and actresses. He possesses a highly retentive and wildly associative mind that seems to require constant stimulation. One song or movie title will trigger an avalanche of related titles in his fevered brain. He scurries off to track them down.

The uniquely configured, hyperactive mind of Billy F. Gibbons is the engine that drives ZZ Top, that Little Ol' Blues Band from Texas, now in its 38th year of operation and likely to keep on running infinitely, thanks to the caffeinated Energizer bunny that resides in the curiously adorned noggin of Billy F. Gibbons.

"Billy's an interesting guy," says Dusty Hill, ZZ Top's bassist and Gibbons' bandmate for the past four decades. "He's got a lot of varied interests. If you're involved in some venture he's into, you really get into it."

Everybody knows that ZZ Top are one of the greatest things ever to spring from the Texas mud, but fewer people get the Hollywood connection. Billy's dad, Fred, was a soundtrack musician and composer for MGM during the Thirties. His uncle Cedric is one of the most celebrated cinematic art directors of Hollywood's Golden Age. In fact, Billy inherited the family manse in the Hollywood Hills. The adobe-style dwelling is brimming with further artifacts of Billy's mania for shopping. Museum-quality pieces from his world-class collection of African art adorn the rooms. A number of vintage automobiles, all of them black, are parked out front. And, of course, there are guitars and amps everywhere—rare ones, new ones, the weird and the wonderful: a Billy Bo Gretsch Jupiter based on an ax given to Billy by rock and roll legend Bo Diddley, a brand-new black JB Tele adorned with sparkling jewels, a few pawnshop specials, three Watkins Dominator amps of different vintages and a Marshall Bluesbreaker in red-orange Tolex.

There's even more stuff at Billy's house in Houston, the city in which he was born. Houston is also the site of ZZ Top's recording studio, Foam Box, and eight warehouses containing the bulk of Billy's African art collection, hundreds of guitars, amps, effects and Lord knows what else. Billy divides his time between the L.A. and Houston residences as well as various other locales. No one fully understands the comings and goings of Billy F. Gibbons. That's one of the rules.

The Houston Billy is the one everybody knows: the deep-talkin' Texan with a passion for barbecue, roadhouses, mud-flap gals and stockcar racetracks. But Billy's Hollywood flair is every bit as crucial to ZZ Top's identity and longevity as the group's deep Texas blues roots. His penchant for showmanship and sharp eye for visuals (a genetic legacy from Uncle Cedric, perhaps) has enabled him to reinvent the band for each succeeding era.

Any one human being's conception of ZZ Top depends heavily on the decade in which that particular human being made the passage through adolescence into adulthood. For those who came up in the Seventies, ZZ Top are the ultimate beer-drinkin', hell-raisin', good-timin', ass-kickin' party band. This is the ZZ Top of "Tush," "La Grange," "Whiskey'n Mama" and "Enjoy and Get It On." For Eighties fans, they're one of the most ubiquitous, albeit unlikely, icons of the MTV era, three sharp-dressed men with a sound as gleaming and streamlined as the custom hot rods and curvaceous cuties seen in the video clips for "Gimmie All Your Lovin'," "Legs" and "Sharp Dressed Man."

In the Nineties and beyond, ZZ Top returned to their roots and emerged as curious curators of the blues legacy. Bearded barrelhouse gurus, semi-mythical characters, they came to remind us that rock and roll ain't nothin' but the bastard offspring of the blues and hillbilly music. This is the group that brought us "My Head's in Mississippi," "Fuzzbox Voodoo," "Poke Chop Sandwich" and "Buck Nekkid." Bless their grizzled beards.

ROSS HALFIN

Billy at home in Los Angeles, June 2007

Phoenix, 1981

F. Gibbons. Every note is steeped in the rich American musical heritage that Billy absorbed growing up in Houston in the Fifties. Some of his earliest musical memories are of the diverse sounds coming out of the radio, what we now call "roots music."

"The favorite channels on the dial," Billy recalls, "seemed to be the R&B stations KYOK and KCOH that played all the blues you could use and also country-and-western tracks of the day, back when Hank Williams reigned king. In those radio offerings, one could hear the crossover elements that led to the birth of rock and roll: the blues meeting country, meeting hillbilly and even bluegrass—all of this wild, 'nonlegitimate' music, a heartfelt, more soulful kind of invention. Radios were still in a rather primitive vacuum tube state back then, so you could turn them up loud and get beautiful rich distortion."

Billy's dad had moved on from Hollywood's studio orchestras to become a conductor of the Houston Symphony Orchestra and high-society bandleader. But Billy's musical education continued on an entirely different track at age seven, when a reckless babysitter began to bring young master William and his five-year-old sister out to the local Houston nightspots, where the future leader of ZZ Top got his first taste of live blues and R&B music, played in the smoky dives that are the proper environment of these musical idioms. The next major turning point occurred on Christmas morning of 1962.

"I got my first guitar on Christmas day, shortly after I'd turned 13," Billy says. "It was a single-pickup, single-cutaway Gibson Melody Maker, with a Fender Champ amp. I immediately retired to my room and learned how to play the intro figure from Ray Charles' 'What'd I Say,' and by sundown I had started learning the signature Jimmy Reed rhythm lines."

HANGIN' WITH HENDRIX: LIFE BEFORE ZZ TOP

Billy played in a variety of junior high and high school rock bands during that golden mid-Sixties era when groups were forming in garages and basements across America, knocking together their own rough take on the British Invasion sounds of groups like the Rolling Stones, Kinks and Yardbirds. But his first fully professional act was the Moving Sidewalks, a psychedelic blues outfit patterned after Texas' celebrated 13th Floor Elevators. The late Sixties had arrived. Hippiedom was taking hold.

"There was this big house in Houston called the Louisiana house," Billy recalls. "It was this giant, beautiful 1920s mansion, and it became the big hippie house in town. There were little cubicles that became rooms to live in. The Elevators lived there. We moved in. The Red Crayola, another remarkable psychedelic band, lived there too. Those guys were artists of all sorts. Visual artists. The house was a real interesting kind of artistic enclave. It was not restricted to just musicians; there were light-show guys, all kinds of people."

Billy himself had considered a career in the visual arts shortly after high school. "I had enrolled in art college and then went up to Austin to go to the University of Texas to study art," he says. "But the music was a stronger call at that time. It was either one or the other, and I chose music, although I kept on with my art fixation, this never-ending quest to figure out how to draw a line from point A to point B."

But the art school refugee soon found ways to manifest his bizarre visual sensibilities through music gear. Billy's mania for the wild customizing of guitars dates back to his Moving Sidewalks days. Evidence of this can be found in his recent coffee table book, *Rock and Roll Gearhead*. On page 152, we find a photo of a strange, square-bodied custom job lined with pink fur, the forebear of the well-known fuzzy guitars from ZZ Top's MTV era two decades later.

"I was always a big fan of Bo Diddley," says Billy. "And if you look closely at the cover photograph on the LP entitled *Bo Diddley Is a Lover*, as he sits on the floor, he's got his famous rectangular Gretsch on one side and on the other side there's a single-cutaway Gibson Les Paul Jr. that was covered in shag grey carpeting. This was truly the inspiration to emulate that kind of crazy guitar craft, which I did on a butchered Telecaster, aided and assisted

ROSS HALFIN

peting. This was truly the inspiration to emulate that kind of crazy guitar craft, which I did on a butchered Telecaster, aided and assisted by D.F. Summers, the bass player for the Moving Sidewalks. He was also quite talented as a craftsman in guitar building—only in those days, it wasn't so much guitar building as guitar aberration. We learned how to ruin quite a few guitars real quick.

"But Mr. Summers helped bring those early custom guitar ideas into reality, even going on to create the first spinning guitar. He devised a spinning device that he added to his Flying V bass during the Moving Sidewalks' tour with Jimi Hendrix. There were a couple of moments in the set where we turned D.F. loose. Of course, he had to unplug his bass to avoid getting the patch cord tangled up when the instrument was spinning. [*This was years before wireless, of course.*] But it was such a magnetic visual thing. D.F. Summers loaned his talents years later to the ZZ Top spinning furry guitars. So what goes around comes around."

"It was unspoken but quite evident that Hendrix threw caution to the winds," Billy notes, "and decided to do things to and with a guitar that were not necessarily written in any of the how-to books. For instance, it was considered a no-no to chain two Fuzz-Tones together. But I saw Hendrix chain five of them together! And he'd do this personalized dance, stomping on five different pedals, sometimes playing with all five of them on at once. I think it's fair to give him the award for breaking the rules and starting to do things that no one dared do before. That was part of his genius: a total lack of fear."

ENTER PEARLY GATES: THE BIRTH OF ZZ TOP

By the start of 1969, the reverb-drenched, combo-organ enhanced, early psychedelic sound of the Moving Sidewalks had been all but totally eclipsed by the heavier power-trio vibe initiated by groups like the Jimi Hendrix Experience, Cream and Blue Cheer. Around this time, which coincided with the United States' escalation of the Vietnam War, the Sidewalks' bassist and organist were drafted into the army. This left Billy free to pursue his dream of forming his own power trio.

And so ZZ Top were born. The original incarnation featured Billy, Moving Sidewalks' drummer Dan Mitchell and Lanier Greg on bass. This lineup recorded one single, "Salt Lick," backed with "Miller's Farm." It was okay, but things didn't really gel until the drummer Frank Beard and bassist Dusty Hill fell into place as the ZZ Top rhythm section that would reign supreme for the next four decades.

Hill and Beard had played together in their own psychedelic blues outfit, American Blues, which released two albums: *American Blues Do Their Thing* and *American Blues Is Here.* "There were song titles like 'Chocolate Ego'," Hill says, laughing. "You get the idea. Also, I'd played with Freddie King on and off. I played at the Fillmore in San Francisco for two weeks with Freddie. Ike and Tina Turner were on the bill, along with Buddy Guy, Blue Cheer and Electric Flag [*a Sixties act that featured guitarist Mike Bloomfield and future Hendrix collaborator Buddy Miles.*]"

Clearly, Dusty and Frank were a seasoned rhythm section by the time they joined forces with Gibbons. "Billy's band opened for Hendrix," says Dusty. "American Blues opened for the Animals and Herman's Hermits. In fact, we had a little party with Herman's Hermits after the show. You can imagine. It didn't go on all night long. Well, at least nobody hit anybody. I think it broke up just in time."

"I don't think they were the partiers that we were," Beard adds.

Beard joined ZZ Top first and then brought Hill into the picture. Dusty beat out a bunch of other potential bassists. His audition quickly morphed from a try-out to a joyous, hour-long jam on a blues shuffle. It's one of the legendary episodes in ZZ Top lore.

"Dusty and I knew each other's tricks," Beard explains. "So automatically his audition sounded four times better than the other bass players we were auditioning. I really wanted Dusty in the band. So when the other bass players were up there, I made sure it was plenty lame. When Dusty got up there, we knew all these little punches and kicks we could do together at certain points. And it was like, 'Wow! Oh man!' "

> "It was considered a no-no to chain two Fuzz-Tones together. But I saw Hendrix chain five of them together!" —*Gibbons*

Nearly as important as finding the right rhythm section—even more some might say—was finding the right guitar rig to bring that raw, raunchy ZZ Top sound to life. In the Moving Sidewalks, Billy had used mainly Strats and Teles through American-made Vox Super Beatle amps. Now he was after a heavier sound and had decided he just had to have a Les Paul and a Marshall. In 1969, mind you, this was far from being the standard gear configuration it is today. Marshall amps were brand new in the States, and guitarists were just beginning to recognize the value of the Les Paul as a weapon of rock destruction.

"The mystique of the sunburst Les Paul," Billy explains, "was first ignited by Keith Richards, who had what is thought to be the first sunburst that made the London scene. You've probably seen pictures of Keith Richards' 'burst with a Bigsby. What makes that instrument intriguing is that you also see photographs of it being played by Jimmy Page, Mick Jagger, Brian Jones and Jeff Beck. So it must have been passed around a bit. But what really got me excited about the sunburst Les Paul was the back cover of the first John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers LP [*released in 1965*], the 'Beano' album [Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton]. There we see Eric Clapton with a Les Paul and a Marshall combo amp in the background. And immediately those who could put two and two together began to suspect that this wonderful guitar sound and its richness of tone might be the result of that combination of guitar and amplifier. So the quest was to go find a Les Paul sunburst and a Marshall amplifier."

Billy got the guitar first: a 1959 sunburst Gibson Les Paul that has passed into legend under the name Pearly Gates. There are many myths as to where Billy obtained Pearly, the most prominent being that the guitar was found under a bed. Billy will admit to paying $250 for the guitar, an incredible deal when you consider not only what the instrument is worth today but also the staggering amount of good use Billy has gotten out of Pearly on every ZZ Top album from the very first to the most recent.

"Out of the 1,750 or so sunburst Les Pauls made between 1958 and '60, although each has its own stylized personality characteristics, I've yet to find one that is not rip-roarin' groovy," Billy declares. "They're all wicked. But Pearly remains the queen. I guess she was just made on the right day, with the right piece of wood, right amount of paint, right amount of wrapping on the pickup. I can always rely on Pearly to make the amp stand up and bark. Pearly is such a powerhouse, high-output instrument. It will kick the preamp's butt. And when the preamp barks, the amp will follow."

With his coveted sunburst Les Paul in hand, Billy set about acquiring the amp of his dreams. The magic wizard who made this wish come true was none other than Jeff Beck. Or more accurately, Jeff Beck's roadie.

Fellow hot-rod enthusiasts and guitar aces both, Gibbons and El Becko bonded on one of Beck's very first U.S. tours.

"Jeff stopped at Houston for a show, and I had the opportunity to hang out with him a little," Billy recalls. "And I was fascinated by these giant, tall amplifiers he had, these Marshall 100-watt rigs. It was the Super Lead 100, model number 1968. And it was Jeff's roadie who had a friendship with Jim Marshall and had a way to buy Marshalls cheap and get 'em into the States. Interestingly enough, we used the same Marshall rig for Dusty's bass playing. The wealth of grind that those amps offered worked just as well for bass as for guitar. So we had two identical amp stacks, both being guitar rigs, that we used for guitar and bass. They were purchased for $800 U.S., delivered. And they didn't require transformer voltage power supplies. They were some of the first 'made for U.S.' 110-volt Marshalls. We bought two and very quickly reordered two more. One is good, more is better.

"Those amps played a big role in how to solve the trio puzzle: how to make three sound

suddenly became real wide, no holds barred and all holes filled. It was great for us, because we didn't have to hire sidemen; we kept the band three. It was a lot more affordable. Fewer arguments, too."

THE LONDON YEARS, PHASE ONE (1970–72): MICK DIGS 'EM!

By now, ZZ Top were starting to attract attention. Their manager, Bill Ham, secured them a deal with London Records. The guys were delighted to be on the same record label as the Rolling Stones. They promptly holed up in a small Texas recording facility, Robin Hood Brian Studios, and knocked out their debut disc, aptly named *ZZ Top's First Album* and released in 1970.

"We attempted to create material written by the three of us, with no idea of where it would go," Billy says. "What you hear is what you get. The tone of that record is appealing in that we were merely upstart copyists attempting to present our version of the blues, coupled with what we thought would sound like Keith, Beck, Page, Clapton, Mick Taylor, Peter Green...those guys. Growing up, Frank and Dusty had listened to the same radio stations I did: the late-night station out of Nashville, WLAC, and the same Mexican border blasters. So we had a shared experience from the start that was able to be brought forward in the creation of ZZ Top, plus the bonus of having newfound heroes in the British Invasion guys. It was a handy way to start."

The album is very much a "live in the studio" affair, recorded with the group's newly acquired touring rig. "The first album is all Pearly Gates through a 100-watt Marshall," Billy explains. "Dusty was playing a Danelectro Longhorn bass through his 100-watt Marshall. In famous Dusty fashion, he forgot to bring his '51 Tele bass to the studio, so he had to use the house bass at the studio, which was this weird Danelectro Longhorn. I think it was a two-pickup model, or maybe a single. And that's what made up the sound."

Shortly after the debut album was completed, Billy took his first steps toward amassing the impressive guitar collection that he possesses today. "Pearly had such a robust and distinctive personality, and it was my goal to get a spare," he says. "Looking at Pearly, I thought, Let's see, this is just a chunk of wood. It must be these humbucking pickups that make it sound so great. So my goal was not, 'Let's get another sunburst Les Paul!' it was, 'Let's get another Gibson guitar with these humbucking pickups!' We didn't even know that the sought-after humbucking pickups were the ones marked 'PAF'—Patent Applied For, the first early humbuckers.

"But my second two-humbucking Gibson was a 1958 korina Flying V. A buddy down the street said, 'Hey man, you wanted a Gibson with two humbuckers. I got one I don't need. I'm still playing my Fender. So do you want to buy this Gibson? I don't even know what it is. It's kind of odd. It's hard to hold on your leg and play. But it's got the pickups you want.' I said, 'Well, if it's got the pickups, bring it over. How much you want?" And he said, 'Three hundred bucks.' That was $50 more than I paid for Pearly, but I said, 'Okay, fine.' And yes, it had a great sound. It was a far cry from the shape of the Les Paul, but it had those early PAFs."

Onstage in 2003

Billy's guitar collection had grown appreciably by the time sessions for the second ZZ Top album, *Rio Grande Mud* (1972), rolled around. "I had acquired some more of those two-humbucker Gibson guitars," he says, "none of which were matching up to Pearly. They were a little less loud, so I remained on the quest. I said, 'Certainly there's another guitar out there that sounds like Pearly.' But I've yet to find one. Close, yes. But Pearly is still the benchmark."

Nonetheless, several of those other guitars came in handy for overdubs on *Rio Grande Mud*. Billy made extensive use of a 1956 sunburst Fender Stratocaster, which provided a nice single-coil counterpoint to Pearly's throaty roar. "Moving from the first album to the second," Billy notes, "we thought, It's not out of our realm to use a few different guitars and amps to get some different sounds. The music explosion that was taking place at the time was providing a wide range of tonal variances, and that's when we were willing to get inventive."

Slide guitar overdubs made their first appearance on *Rio Grande Mud*. Billy used a 1958 Sunburst Les Paul—not quite Pearly but not at all shabby—for the slide leads on "Just Got Paid." He plays slide in a variety of open tunings. " 'Apologies to Pearly,' also from *Rio Grande Mud*, is an instrumental slide number played in open E," he explains. Open G [D G D G B D] and open A [E A E A C♯ E] are two more favorites.

ZZ Top's initial "Southern Man" persona started to come into focus on *Rio Grande Mud*. Songs like "Just Got Paid" and "Chevrolet" project a strong, blue-collar, workin'-man

ROBERT KNIGHT/RETNA LTD.

identity. But their fondness for cowboy hats and western garb was known to cause confusion back in 1972. For instance, the crowd was a mite perplexed when ZZ Top opened for the Rolling Stones in 1972.

"We got word that Mick Jagger heard our first album and liked it," Dusty Hill relates. "And he wanted us to open for the Stones in Hawaii. That just blew us away. But the next thing I heard was that Stevie Wonder opened for them here in the States and actually got booed at one show. So I was scared to death. We get onstage in Hawaii with our cowboy hats, boots and jeans and you could hear a pin drop. Somebody went, 'Oh no, they're a country band.' "

"But we had our Marshall stacks cranked and we were ready to pounce for the kill," says Billy, taking up the tale. "We very quickly had to get grinding to dispel the myth: Yeah we may look like we just fell off a wagon, but we're here to entertain."

"We got an encore on all three shows we did," Dusty adds. "And it was written up in *Rolling Stone* or something like that. It was one of the first big steps for us. And I've got great memories of that, like meeting Charlie Watts down at the bar and having a few."

THE LONDON YEARS, PHASE TWO (1973–76): SHITKICKERS ON ACID

The album that put ZZ Top on the map was *Tres Hombres*. Released in 1973, it was the record that crystallized ZZ Top's sound and early style.

Like *Rio Grande Mud*, the title *Tres Hombres* reflects the influence of la Frontera, the Mexican border flavor that creeps into Texan culture in general and the ZZ Top aesthetic in particular. And by this point, ZZ Top had become a highly seasoned live act, an inevitable byproduct of almost constant touring.

"Not to knock London Records, but they didn't do a great deal for us," says Hill. "We were humping every night. Any gig. Every gig. Opening for whoever we could."

At the same time, with two albums under their ornate western belt buckles, ZZ Top had become comfortable and highly competent in the recording studio. All of these factors helped to make *Tres Hombres* the group's first Platinum album and an enduring catalog item to this day.

"*Tres Hombres* was our first breakthrough, and it's still a favorite disc with fans and the band," says Billy. "One of the reasons for that is that it has our first Top-10 hit, 'La Grange.' "

ZZ Top's tribute to a legendary Texas brothel, "La Grange" is a shuffle boogie in a style initiated by bluesman John Lee Hooker and revived by late-Sixties blues group Canned Heat. ZZ Top put their own stamp on the idiom, although Billy's low-pitched lead vocal came about somewhat by accident.

"We'd cut the music track, and I was working on the vocal," Billy recalls. "But somehow it was not gelling. We worked and worked on it. I remember the session had started early, and we'd gotten to the point where everyone was getting fatigued and hungry. So I said, 'Look, take a lunch break.' And I remember, I was sitting in a metal folding chair, having stood up in front of the vocal mic for hours. I pulled the microphone down and asked the engineer to give it one more try. But he was having some kind of technical difficulty and said, 'Uh, you'll have to wait a minute until I figure this out.'

"After a little while he said, 'We're running, but I'm not sure if we're taking [*i.e. recording*] this. You'll probably hear it in your headphones, but don't pay any attention to it.' So I heard the music start. And it was just one of those things where I started horsing around with this low voice. I got through the first stanza of the two. I happened to glance up through the control room glass and the engineer was looking happy and excited, making gestures that seemed to say, Keep going. You've got something here and we're getting it on tape! And that was the take and the final keeper—the vocal you hear on the record."

The extra beefy guitar track combines two of Billy's favorite guitars: Pearly Gates and a 1955 maple-neck, hard-tail Stratocaster, both pumped through 100-watt Marshalls. The combination of Pearly's Les Paul/humbucker low-end growl and the Strat's crisply defined, single-coil sparkle is a potent one. The Strat is heard first, stating the song's main chordal theme. Then the Les Paul comes in when the drums and bass enter, doubling the Strat's rhythm pattern and kicking the groove into overdrive.

"That '55 Strat is just one of those great-playing, great-sounding instruments," Billy says. "I still have it. By the time we recorded *Tres Hombres*, we'd entered the era of the overdub. So it gave us a glorious opportunity to bring both Pearly and the Strat into the picture."

Billy also used the Strat to play both of the song's memorable solos. The second lead is the first ever on a ZZ Top disc to incorporate pinch harmonics, a technique that would become a signature element of Billy's guitar style. "And that happened quite by accident, too," he notes. "I had not studied it or anything. I just really came across it and said, 'Gee, this is an odd effect.' At that time it was quite novel. Those harmonics can be highly unpredictable. But the technique is basically pick followed by flesh from the thumb. My question is how does Dusty do it without a pick? How does Dusty play at all is my question. But he plays very well. He's the best, and very loud."

> "Certainly there's another guitar out there that sounds like Pearly. But I've yet to find one. Close, yes. But Pearly is still the bench mark."
> —*Gibbons*

Like *ZZ Top's First Album* and *Rio Grande Mud* before it, *Tres Hombres* was recorded at Robin Hood Brian Studio in Texas, but it is the first ZZ Top album to be mixed at Memphis' legendary Ardent recording studio, one more factor that puts it in a different league than its predecessors. Memphis, Tennessee, is one of America's great music cities, known, with some justice, as the Home of the Blues. B.B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and Otis Redding came from Memphis. With Sun Studios, Sam Phillips' Memphis Recording Service and Stax and Ardent in town, Memphis has always been a great recording destination as well.

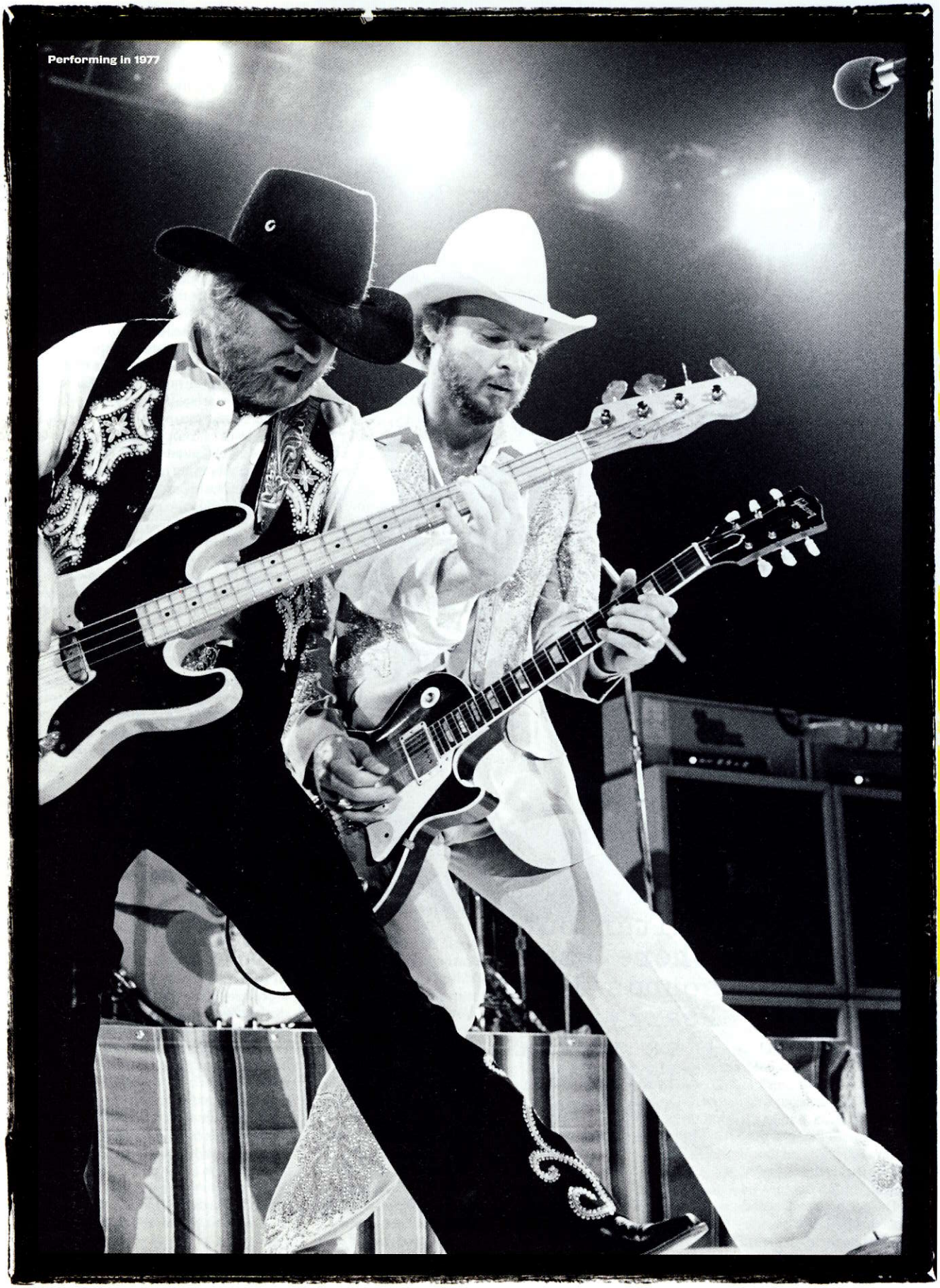
ZZ Top first came to Memphis to play a blues festival. The promoter had heard their records and assumed they were black. This misunderstanding made them the only white artists on the bill, but everything worked out fine in the end.

"There were a lot of local musicians hanging about," Billy narrates. We made such a good impression that we had the opportunity to meet them after the show was over. All the local hotshot gunslingers were there. And a couple of them said, 'Gee whiz, you guys make some pretty good records. Why don't you consider recording here in Memphis?' I said, 'We've just completed a series of recordings which we're ready to take to the next level. We call it *Tres Hombres*, in keeping with our Tex-Mex origins.' They said, 'Since you already recorded it, would you consider mixing it here? We have a studio here in Memphis called Ardent, and there's some real handy talent on the engineering staff. As a matter of fact, Led Zeppelin have just finished recording their *Led Zeppelin III* album at Ardent.'

"Well, that was big news. After a brief discussion, we decided, Let's give it a try. And having mixed our first Top-10 record at Ardent, which was a big deal, we now had a bond with music made in Memphis. And we worked at Ardent recording studio for the next 20 years."

It was a no-brainer for the band to head for Ardent when the time arrived to record the follow-up to *Tres Hombres*. The studio sessions would yield half of what became ZZ Top's second Platinum success, *Fandango*. The other half of the album was culled from a hell-raisin' live show in New Orleans. So fans got the best of both worlds: some first-rate ZZ Top studio tracks and a taste of the live sound that had made the group a hot concert draw in the Seventies. The album also offered the wider palette of guitar tones than any of its predecessors.

"*Fandango* was when we were starting to show up bringing truckloads of guitars," Billy says. "This was a real turning point in learning how to experiment with unusual gear. It turns out that the engineers who worked at Ardent—John Hampton, Terry Manning and



Performing in 1977

NEIL ZLOZOWER

Joe Hardy—were all gearheads and had rooms of off-the-wall equipment they had managed to amass. One of the favorite amps on that album was a Silvertone 2x12 combo that had belonged to Alex Chilton [*Memphis legend of Box Tops/Big Star fame who frequently recorded at Ardent*]. Many of the artists who passed through Ardent ended up using it. And there was a 4x12 tweed Fender Bassman and a little top-loading tweed Fender Harvard with a 10-inch speaker that had belonged to Steve Cropper [*Memphis guitar legend of Stax Records/Otis Redding/Booker T. and the MGs fame*]."

Billy's distorted tones on *Fandango* tracks like "Nasty Dogs and Funky Kings" hit a new level of graininess—a tough, squared-off, highly clipped tone that would become another signature Gibbons guitar timbre. Billy attributes the tonality in part to the advent of solid-state compressors, mic pre-amps and other studio gear coming into currency at studios like Ardent in the mid-Seventies. Elsewhere on the disc, "Heard It on the X" is a superb slide workout in open G, and "Blue Jean Blues" features some of the most lyrical, minor-key, slow-blues playing Billy has ever done. For the song, he played a maple-necked '59 Strat, and the resulting clean tone shimmers with amazing depth and clarity.

"That was another studio experiment," says Billy. "The guitar was plugged directly into the board. Our equipment truck had broken down and we had no amps, but the clock was running and the engineer said, 'Well, if you just want to get something down on tape, we can plug your guitar straight into the board.' Of course, Fenders are by nature ultra-clean and bright, so putting that Strat through the board worked for that particular tune. 'Blue Jean Blues' could be called one of the more haunting slow-blues-based numbers that we've managed to get down. The quietness of it all allowed that clean effect to be used to good advantage. It's very different from what we're known for—a kind of rash, hard, distorted tone. But it's still a favorite."

By far the best known track on *Fandango*, however, is "Tush," a brash uptempo shuffle that became a major hit for ZZ Top. There are numerous, varied and highly imaginative interpretations of what the word "tush," as applied in the song, actually means, but it's clearly the tale of one man's quest for something fine, sung with fearsome upper-register intensity by Dusty Hill.

"We wrote 'Tush' at a soundcheck in Alabama in about six or eight minutes," the bassist recalls. "It was hot as hell, and with the exception of a very few words the song you hear on the record is what we wrote that day. We always tape our soundchecks for that very reason [*i.e. songwriting*]. Usually, though, it's a little lick or a vocal line or something, not a whole damn song!"

The only thing that could match the intensity of "Tush" is a full-on live set by ZZ Top, which is exactly what five of *Fandango*'s songs deliver.

"For that particular show, we were at a famous New Orleans venue called the Warehouse," Billy recollects. "It's a great room, a turn of the century, wood-and-brick warehouse right on Tchoupitoulas Street in a line of many old warehouses. Not only was it a popular place to go but the sound inside was fabulous. With that much brick and old wood, it was just this resonant box of tone. It didn't really matter what you brought into there, the room made it sound great. Everybody I've ever talked to who played at the Warehouse has said, 'Yeah, isn't that a great-sounding place to play?' "

> **"*Rhythmeen* is probably the best example of ZZ Top's foray into the super-low frequencies."**
> **—*Gibbons***

The Platinum success of *Tres Hombres* and *Fandango* enabled ZZ Top to mount one of the most ambitious and bizarre tours in all of rock history. ZZ Top's World Wide Texas Tour was billed as "Taking Texas to the People." They meant that literally. The 35,000-square-foot stage was hewn in the shape of Texas and weighed 35 tons. It took five massive trucks to transport this mammoth stage and all its attendant rigging, not to mention ranch-hand props that included fences, windmills, live cacti and livestock. Yes, a live steer and buffalo, along with assorted breeds of buzzard and rattlesnake, all had roles in the big extravaganza. They were attended by fully qualified animal handlers, who also traveled with this rolling rock and roll circus. Nonetheless, sometimes the critters got loose, terrorizing concertgoers.

As for Gibbons, Hill and Beard, they were decked out in elaborately stitched and ornately studded western suits designed and handmade by the famous country-and-western tailor Nudie Cohn. The outfits included big ol' cowboy hats, naturally. Billy and Dusty played custom axes with Texas-shaped bodies. By this time, Billy's lifelong quest for a guitar equal to Pearly had led him deep into designing custom instruments. Gibson made him the Texas-shaped guitars, but over the years, Billy has hatched increasingly outrageous guitar designs with a number of top luthiers, John Bolan being a particularly favorite accomplice.

By way of context, the Worldwide Texas Tour rolled down the highway at a time when musical stars like David Bowie, Alice Cooper, Kiss and Parliament-Funkadelic were mounting highly elaborate concert tours, bringing larger-than-life guillotine executions, spaceship landings and other spectacles to the rock stages. Seen against the backdrop of these big shows, the World Wide Texas Tour functioned as both competition and parody.

The mid Seventies were also a time when glam was very much the prominent fashion mode in rock. A lot of groups and their fans were trying to look like androgynous, decadent, urban, ultrahip space aliens. Meanwhile, ZZ Top were going around like shit kickers on acid—very much the antithesis of glam, although every bit as dressed up and image conscious as the glamsters. The cowboy hats that had been a liability in '72 had been transformed into a high-concept statement, a kind of redneck drag. This wry overinsistence on their Texas roots was one of several factors that separated ZZ Top from the herd of "southern boogie" bands that had also gained currency in the mid to late Seventies.

And like all great concepts, it functioned on several levels. More down-home fans could raise a longhorn Bud in the air and holler "hell yeah!" while hipsters could feel like they were sharing an inside joke. ZZ Top were following the age old showbiz maxim: Take whatever it is you've got and exaggerate it.

"Well, we had a glaring awareness of our inability to look like fashion models," Billy deadpans. "To this day, one of the band in-jokes is aimed at our fearless bass player, Dusty Hill, who is known for being immune to fashion. Be it clothing, the favorite guitar of the day, the newest amp, you will not find it in Dusty's closet. In the beginning, we didn't have time to design wardrobe; we were touring too hard, busting our ass to get to the next show and going onstage in whatever we happened to be wearing. That in itself became part of the perception of ZZ Top: 'Oh yeah, they're those Texas guys, I've seen them. They wear cowboy hats and cowboy boots a lot.' What started out as every day clothing to leave the house in over the years became a trademark, whether intentional or not."

Keeping the Longhorn State motif going, ZZ Top decided to name their next album *Tejas*, the Spanish spelling for the territory that had once been part of Mexico. It's another classic, bluesy ZZ Top disc, but a pronounced country influence also creeps into the mix. The album's hit single, "It's Only Love," is not only one of catchiest things the band has every done but also possesses an unmistakable twang. And "She's a Heartbreaker" is as country as it gets.

"Oh, without question," Billy concedes. "Around that time I was driving from Houston down to Austin a lot of hear the Fabulous Thunderbirds, who were just getting started and playing 'Blue Monday' nights at a pizza joint in Austin called the Rome Inn. And halfway down, you could start to pick up this great Austin radio station, KOKE-FM. One of the DJs on there decided to turn the playlist upside down and create a format that could go from George Jones to the Rolling Stones, back to back. That certainly had an impact on me.

"And at the time, there was this great wave, a new movement coming out of California: country rock. It had started when Roger McGuinn allowed the Byrds to go in that direction on *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*: the cowboy-ification of rock, with pedal steel guitar showing up on rock records. And coming out of that lineup of the Byrds you had Graham Parsons and his band, the Flying Burrito Brothers. And Graham was of course hang- *continued on page 66*

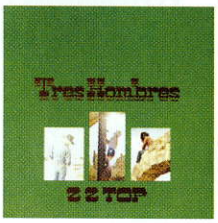
LOCO

Billy Gibbons recalls three decades of Texas excess. By Alan Paul

"LA GRANGE"

Tres Hombres (1973)

"That is straight guitar into amp: a 1955 Strat with a stop tailpiece through a 1969 Marshall Super Lead 100. That fuzz sound in the lead and in the front



and back end of the composition is just pure tube distortion. Pickup-setting differentials account for the different tones. The opening part was played on what we used to call 'the mystery setting' in the dark days before the existence of the five-way toggle switch, when finding that perfect 'tweener [*in-between setting of a three-way pickup selector*] required dedication.

"That Marshall amp, which was a trusted friend through the first six records, was an import brought over by Jeff Beck's at-the-time tech. I had four of those babies, and they were my main road amps for years. I ran them through cabinets with those [*Celestion*] Greenback speakers. They still retain a distinctive, rich, enjoyable tone and are well worth owning. I must, however, advise anyone fortunate enough to find one to beware of the variable power plugs. The 220[*-volt*] setting doesn't work very well outside of the 220 countries, as I can tell you from experience. We had more than a few paper-clip nights over the years [*due to blown fuses*]."

"TUSH"

Fandango! (1975)

"The first three albums were recorded exclusively at the Robin Hood Studios outside of Dallas, and the special sound that always seemed to be accessible there was due in part to the fact that the equipment was nailed to the floor and nothing ever moved so you could always count on a sound. Quite a good sound, I must say.

" 'Tush' was Pearly Gates, my beloved Les Paul, played through the same Marshall Super Lead, and we sure enough did stop and enjoy the G tuning for the composition's slide element. This song was largely straight guitar to amp, but I also utilized a real odd, esoteric device

called the Cooper Time Cube, which was a simplistic application of the complex world of physics. In a small rack-mounted can sits a small speaker, right up next to maybe 50 feet of one-inch rubber tubing, which is coiled, spring-like. The sound waves actually take longer to travel, having to make these corners, creating a type of delay which is quite unlike the familiar sound of a digital delay. That was a real left-field piece of gear which they had—and still have, I might add—in that studio. Some of the guitar sounds that appear to be doubled on the early albums are actually the byproduct of that oddball Cooper Time Cube."

"I'M BAD, I'M NATIONWIDE"

Deguello (1979)

"We wrote this about the great Texas bluesman Joey Long, a Gulf Coast lead-guitar picker who appeared on a great number of wonderful records by the likes of Slim Harpo and Barbara Lynn. He played on Lynn's great hit record 'We Got a Good Thing Going,' which was covered by the Stones, and which was really one of the important recordings that shaped my understanding of where it was I wanted to go with my life. It was good. And so was he.

"Joey loaned me a multistringed mandolin-like instrument from Parral, Mexico, and I put it to good use on 'Nationwide.' If you listen closely, you can hear close-miked mandolin-sounding rhythm accompaniment. The lead track was played on a custom-made, half-size, real short-scaled guitar tuned to G. It was actually standard tuning cranked up a minor third, which remained quite playable thanks to the guitar's short scale.

"The song's tail end alternates between three distinct effects created by two pedals: an Echoplex doubler and a Maestro octave box alternating every third bar between having the octave up and the octave down. The song also contains some Hohner Clavinet,

which was owned by one of our famous Memphis pals, Carlos De Marlos. It's such an interesting sound that it ignited Dusty's [*Hill, bassist*] interest in learning some keyboard skills, and it was he who subsequently handled all the tickling of the ivories."

"CHEAP SUNGLASSES"

Deguello (1979)

"This song was actually written during a trip from the Gulf Coast up to Austin, Texas. A bright spot of creativity flared as we were passing the hamlet of La Grange, and I recited all three verses of 'Cheap Sunglasses' within the space of 20 miles. And that's the way they stayed. Though that may sound simplistic, the lyrics speak for themselves. 'Simplistic' is indeed a word which may come to the minds of some.

"The lead track was performed on a fake Fender guitar, which I used for the wiggle stick—there is a little dive bomb in the solo section. I played it through a Marshall Major, a short-lived 200-watt beast, which had one blown tube. Hence the rather bulbous, rotund sound. There's also a little bit of digital delay for that Bo Diddley impersonation at the tail out, and a Maestro Ring Modulator, which produces the strange tag to each verse. It appears three times, and it's a pretty funny sound. That is one insane effect put to good use."

NEIL ZLOZOWER

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DOUBLE BACK

With *Recycler*, ZZ Top looked to the future by going back to their roots. Billy Gibbons and Dusty Hill recall how it felt to boogie again. **By Harold Steinblatt & Brad Tolinski**

ONCE UPON A TIME there was William Bunch, bluesman. The said Bunch wasn't a bad guitarist, and he was a pretty good pianist. But he had a *great* imagination. So one day he began calling himself Peetie Wheatstraw, the Devil's Son-In-Law and High Sheriff from Hell. And Peetie did pretty good for himself.

William Bunch understood that the blues is more than music. It is entertainment. Even more so, it is *mysterious*.

Tommy Johnson, like the more famous Robert, was said to have sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his skills on the guitar. According to blues scholars, Tommy did little to discourage such talk. Like William Bunch, he understood the power of mystery. Consider Charlie Patton, known as the Father of the Delta Blues, and Aaron "T-Bone" Walker, perhaps the greatest guitarist to come out of Texas. Their styles couldn't have been more dissimilar, but they had at least one thing in common: they were energetic entertainers who, long before Jimi Hendrix restrung his first Strat, played guitar over their heads and behind their backs.

Billy Gibbons and Dusty Hill understand the blues. "Understand," as the word is used here, is not meant in the historic or musical senses, though the two are certainly well equipped in those arenas. As a child, Billy spent countless hours in the time-honored pursuit of Listening to Music You're Not Supposed To. Today, in the true tradition of the blues obsessive, his eyes light up in intimate recognition at the mere mention of an obscure Delta guitarist. And Dusty Hill? He was playing bass behind the legendary Freddie King at *15*—an age when most kids think a "shuffle" is something lazy people do.

Nevertheless, Gibbons and Hill understand the blues in a manner that transcends their considerable knowledge of the music's development and instrumental techniques. Unlike so many second-rate, would-be blues players, they share an intuitive feel for the blues on an entirely different level.

Perhaps the best indicators of this sensibility in Billy and Dusty were the great videos from the *Eliminator* album—particularly "Sharp Dressed Man" and "Legs." Gibbons, Hill and drummer Frank Beard were nothing less than genii in those clips, benign, intangible figures who existed solely to spread thumbs-up encouragement and hot-babe good cheer to

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JOHN PEDEN

deserving, overworked souls worldwide. The ZZ Top boys are the least-focused personas in the videos—the most mysterious. The beards further blur their identities. Gibbons and Hill are not Amish farmers. Nor are they 19th century prospectors, or Hasidic Jews. They are a bit like Peetie Wheatstraw, the Devil's Son-In-Law and High Sheriff from Hell.

ZZ Top and William Bunch would understand each other—that much was made clear by the group's 1991 album, *Recycler*. While it was by no means an acoustic blues album, it was the rootsiest thing Gibbons, Hill and Beard had done in years, the work of men who know the blues—the entertainment, the mystery. As Billy himself sang, "My Head's in Mississippi"...

GUITAR WORLD What is it about the blues that attracted you?

BILLY GIBBONS The backbeat. The two and the four made your head snap. Plus it was cool because our parents hated it. [*laughs*]

DUSTY HILL Actually, my mother turned me on to the blues. We had Lightnin' Hopkins as well as Elvis Presley records. I thought everyone had them. I'd go over to friends' houses and ask them to put on some Howlin' Wolf, and they wouldn't know what I was talking about. Then, when they would come over to my house, I'd play them some blues. Their parents wouldn't let them come back. [*laughs*] The blues were still called "race records" back then. I mean, how cold is that?

The emotion on those records really captured me. I loved the feeling of the music. When I started playing, I couldn't wait to play something that had that much feeling.

GW In what way did the blues stimulate your imagination?

HILL When I was younger, I'd listen to a song and take it literally. I'd think, Boy, what a drag. How horrible, he must be really bummin'. If it was about sex I'd think, Boy, I wish I was that guy!

GW Because your appearances are so unusual, and your videos are so clever, it's very easy to believe that ZZ Top live the lyrics to their songs. In that way, the band comes close to capturing the essence of those legendary country bluesman.

GIBBONS You're right. Cotton is no longer picked by hand, so the problem is: How do you go about writing fresh blues? The blues deals with the highest of highs, the lowest of lows and all points in between. So we had to create surrealistic entities that could handle those extreme mood swings. It seemed that this was the only legitimate way to approach it. We like to think of ourselves as the Salvador Dalis of the Delta.

GW The ZZ Top phenomenon is a wonderful vehicle for fantasy. Do the fans ever confuse your real selves with your video and vinyl personae?

HILL Oh yeah, especially when I'm at home! For example, I'll go into a convenience store, and invariably the guy behind the counter will say, "What are you doing here?"—like he doesn't believe I eat, or something! Then once that's out of the way, he'll start looking out the window to see if the car and the three girls are out there. I usually end up telling him that the girls are repairing the car back at the house, so he won't be too bummed.

GW Billy, you've mentioned that Bo Diddley was one of your big influences. Like you, he was known for his odd-shaped guitars, great rhythm chops and unusual stage clothing.

GIBBONS He was the perfect bridge between Delta blues and rockers like Chuck Berry. Bo's tone—which was produced by a custom Gretsch guitar and two DeArmond single-coil pickups set in the middle toggle position, and a Magnatone amp—was dramatically different. He didn't sound like anyone else.

His sound, combined with his array of bizarre rectangular guitars, made him a real hero. The fact that a major manufacturer built him a special guitar also intrigued me. I thought, Who is this guy? How did he get Gretsch to make him a guitar? He's still one of the most fascinating figures in American rock and roll.

Interestingly, his sound seems to be making a comeback. Recently I've heard a couple of records featuring his distinct rhythm tone. I guess it's taken the music world 30 years to finally crack the code. [*laughs*] It's still a *fine* sound.

GW Who else influenced your sound?

GIBBONS Dusty and I recently compared notes on that subject and came up with the obvious: B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker and Albert Collins. But some of the more obscure influences include Terry Simpson, who played with a Texas outfit called the Raiders. They had several instrumental hits in the Sixties, including "Stick Shift," "Motivation" and "Raising Cain." The Nightcaps, out of Dallas, were also big influences.

HILL Every once in a while, Billy will throw a Nightcaps lick in the middle of a song during a live show, and we'll just look at each other

On the *El Loco* tour, Phoenix, Arizona, 1981

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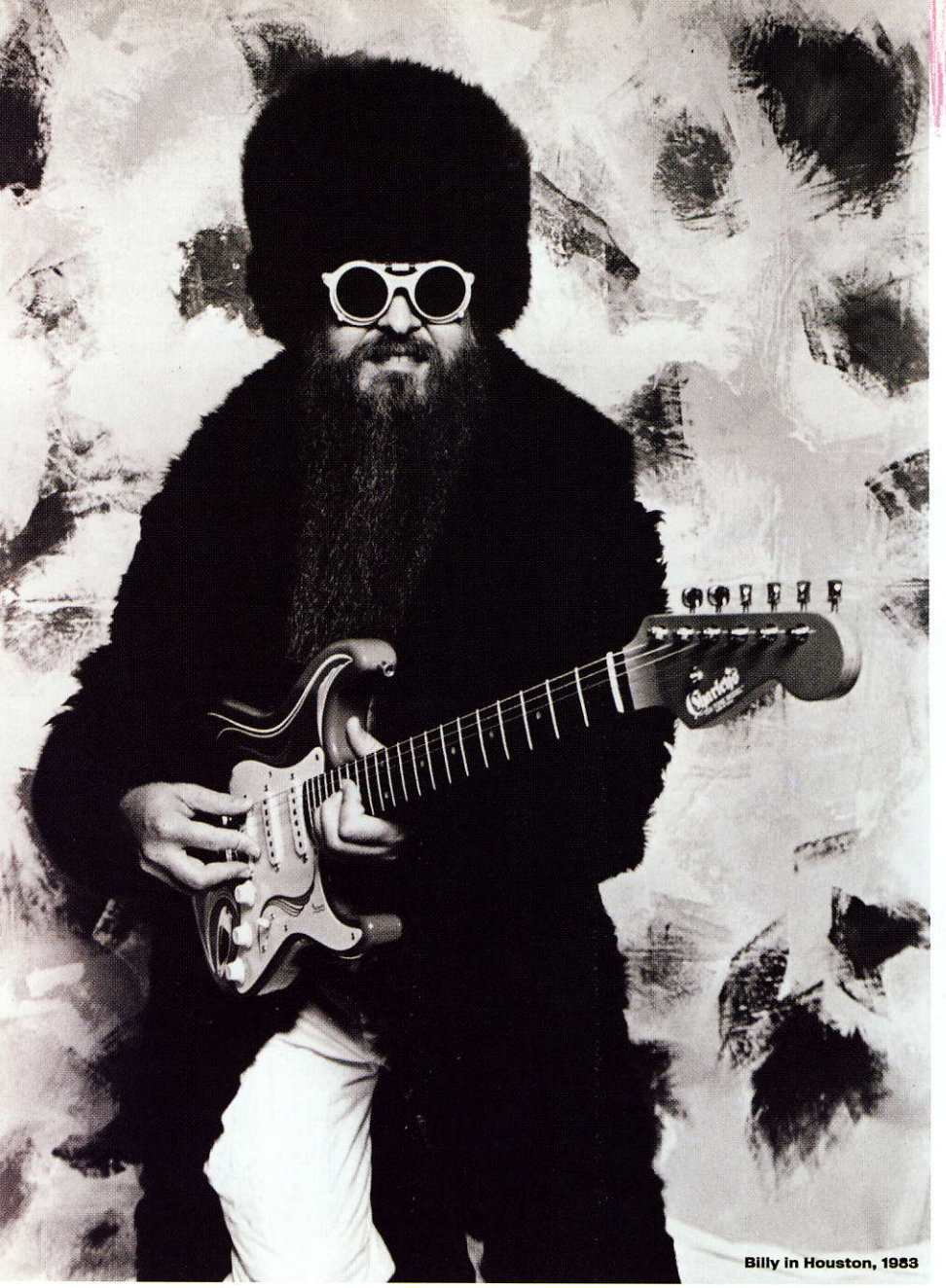
ZZ TOP



Billy in Houston, 1983

and wink. I love it when he does that, 'cause it usually doesn't belong there.

My major influences were primarily guitar players and bands; I started playing bass by accident. My older brother played guitar and I sang. We found a drummer and soon realized we needed to complete the rhythm section, so they elected me to be the bass player. Straight away we were playing in clubs and jamming with everybody in town, so I really learned to play while onstage. After playing for two years, I landed a gig with Freddie King! I was amazed that they even let me on the same stage, because I really wasn't very good—though I came pretty cheap. [*laughs*] I was only 16 at the time and was petrified.

Back then, the clubs were still segregated. One night we played the Ascot Ballroom, which was a black club. I didn't have a driver's license at the time, so somebody dropped me off. I rolled my stuff up to the door, and the doorman, who was a pretty big fella, said somewhat threateningly, "What do you want?" I said, "I'm with the band." He looked me over and said, "I don't think so." Just as all these people started gathering around, Freddie pushed his way through the crowd and said quietly, "C'mon." After one song, everything was all right.

GW What gear did you use when you were playing with Freddie King?

HILL I was playing an old hollowbody Harmony through whatever I could borrow. I finally stepped up to an Ampeg, which I loved because it had *rollers!*

GIBBONS Love that outboard gear. [*laughs*]

GW Was Freddie your main influence?

HILL I learned how to play primarily from Freddie, my brother and Billy. Interestingly, all three share the same philosophy: "Less is best." And "*Solid* less is *the* best." If you have a solid foundation, then you can play.

GW Why is Dallas such a holy place for guitar?

GIBBONS Culturally, up until the mid Fifties there wasn't much to do except play.

GW Dusty, who influenced your singing?

HILL Initially, Elvis and Little Richard. Then there was a long gap. I'm not knocking Pat Boone and Bobby Vee and all that stuff, but it was really getting boring. Then came the English guys, who really saved me. I think people like the Beatles lifted everyone back up.

GW Beginning with *Eliminator*, ZZ Top's whole production style changed. The primary difference can be heard in the rhythm section. Where many groups sweetened their sound by adding synthesized strings and bell tones, you took the opposite route by doubling bass lines with fat, analog-style synths. At times, those doubled bass lines were supplemented with additional sixteenth-note bass ostinatos. How did that approach evolve, and how did you feel about that as a bass player?

HILL I felt fine about it. I have no problems with anything that will enhance the sound. I consider the synthesizer to be just another instrument. I know some people have a problem with it, but eventually they'll get used to it. In the early days, they wouldn't let a drummer play in the Grand Ole Opry. Now it's accepted.

GW I wasn't trying to suggest that the synthesizers had a negative impact on the songs. I was just wondering how the production style evolved.

GIBBONS We had recorded *El Loco* and *Deguello* with everyone in separate booths, and we hated it. It felt too sterile. It really bothered us to be connected with headphones and microphones. So at the outset of *Eliminator* we decided to record in a circle, as a band unit, in one room. Out of that group focus came a new attention to tempo. We started playing to click tracks, drum machines and sequencers for added precision and found that we enjoyed it. It also had a positive impact on tightening up our playing. If you'll notice, the timing on *Eliminator* is tighter than on our previous records. We started adhering to a strident observance of tempo. ZZ Top becomes a four-piece band when "Mr. Time" arrives.

HILL When the rhythm section is rock solid, Billy can be any place he wants to be. That's where the sequencing came in. It's a strange but effective combination. Playing in the same room allows us to reap the full benefits of that "human feel." At the same time, we're able to juxtapose that rootsy groove on top of machine-generated rhythms. The approach allows us to combine the best of both worlds.

GIBBONS It wasn't really that calculated, because we really didn't know what we were doing in the synthesizer domain—which made

ROSS HALFIN

it more fun. We took our cue from Frank Zappa, who said, "Don't read the manual; just get your hands dirty and do it."

GW How did *Recycler* come together?

GIBBONS *Recycler* was interesting to make, because initially we planned to follow the lineage established in *Eliminator* and *Afterburner*. We had written a couple of highly structured pop tunes in our studio in Houston. Then we went out to Los Angeles for a couple of months and got into the whole sequencer, everything-in-its-place thing. But when we arrived in Memphis to finish the record, we slid into a different mode. While we were waiting for all of our high-tech gear to arrive, we set up in a circle and started playing and jamming as a band. The sound, even though it was rougher and looser, felt right in every way. The results of some of those sessions can be heard on cuts like "2000 Blues" and "My Head's in Mississippi." Both are reminiscent of our earlier music, which is why we call *Recycler* our *Tres Hombres/Eliminator* album.

We didn't abandon the ground we covered on *Eliminator* and *Afterburner*—you can still hear the sequencers and synthesizers—but they're much more unobtrusive. We allowed some of the rougher elements of the band to come shining through. "My Head's in Mississippi," which was one of the first completed tracks on the album, is a great example of how we mixed the new with the old. Initially, it was a straight-ahead boogie-woogie. Then Frank stepped in and threw in those highly gated electronic drum fills, which modernized the track.

GW How long did it take for you to complete the album?

GIBBONS Not counting the preproduction time in Houston and Los Angeles, it took us four months to make. *Recycler* was one of our longer projects. I think it took extra time because we moved to Memphis Sound studios on Beale Street. That area is chock full of distractions. There were a lot of great characters always hanging out on the streets. There was one street musician named Alabama, who knew only one song: "Baby Please Don't Go." But that's all he needed to know. He'd play it for one crowd, and when they would move on, he'd play it again for the next crowd, and so on.

GW Billy, your tone is instantly recognizable. What does it consist of?

GIBBONS Tone goes hand-in-hand with delivery, and I credit our producer Bill Ham for coaching me on where the notes should fall. You can really thicken the guitar track by laying back just a breath from the downbeat. That way, the guitar isn't competing directly with the bass and bass drum for space. It's surprising how much that little trick can add to a track.

Also, it's hard not to get a great sound nowadays, with all the wonderful equipment on the market. I'm particularly impressed with Tube Works' MosValve amp. It's just the wildest thing. We used the MosValve and our usual assortment of Fenders and Marshalls.

GW Billy, you and Dusty were close friends and musical colleagues of Stevie Ray Vaughan. It would be appropriate if you concluded our conversation with some words of reminiscence.

GIBBONS He was a tremendous player and a tremendous person. There was a real beautiful sense of closure at Stevie Ray's memorial service. We talked a lot about the old days. One thing particular stood out in my mind: I remember playing a private dance club in Dallas called Arthur's. Stevie Ray, who was 16 at the time, asked to sit in. His older brother, Jimmie, was sitting on the sidelines, so I kind of looked over at him and he just shrugged his shoulders; he didn't say a word. So I let Stevie jump onstage with his red SG. He plugged in and just started wailing. I looked over at Jimmie, who was grinning with a look on his face that said, "Yeah, he my little brother." He was so proud.

I think his duet album with Jimmie [*1990's Family Style*] is a real gift. We all feel so fortunate to have that kind of playing survive in the face of such a great loss. I don't think anyone should harbor any long-term sadness, though. You must grieve the loss to the fullest, but I think he graced us with a great memory and a sense of purpose.

USE YOUR ILLUSION

Blues bad-asses? Pop visionaries? Media magicians? Will the real ZZ Top please stand up!

By Alan di Perna

BILLY GIBBONS PULLS A black baseball cap down on my head. He selects a pair of shades from a bag filled with designer eyewear and fits them on my face, stepping back to survey the effect. "Yes, those I think," he pronounces, meditatively stroking his trademark chin warmer. Next comes a long overcoat to match Mr. Gibbons' own leather floor duster. Like a paleface at some tribal initiation ceremony, I feel privileged, and maybe a little scared. Here I am, being transformed into an honorary member of ZZ Top—beardless, but otherwise fully rigged.

Billy wheels me around to face the camera and begins issuing terse commands. "Left foot forward! Right hand pointing, like this, see? No, no! The pinkie's extended. That's it, yeah. Okay, full cheese. Ready...now!"

The electronic flash whirs and fires, immortalizing my very brief tenure with Texas' leanest, meanest and all-around *strangest* post-modern blues band. The whole impromptu souvenir snapfest has been a mere diversion from the true business at hand: a high-powered photo shoot with not one but two heart-stoppingly gorgeous models and a squadron of equally beautiful guitars. It's all part of the promotional whirl surrounding *Antenna*, ZZ Top's long-awaited new album, the band's first for their new record label, RCA.

Messrs. Billy Gibbons, Dusty Hill and Frank Beard have commandeered a suite at the Houston Omni, where they've spent a week entertaining journalists and photographers in the grand style that the world has come to expect of ZZ Top. After spending many hours in the man's company, I can offer the following indispensable list of Essential Facts About Billy Gibbons.

1) BILLY LOVES PHOTO SHOOTS

Most musicians hate 'em. Not Billy. Operating on just a few hours' sleep, he's everywhere at once, carefully fine-tuning every pose and camera setup, selecting just the right guitar for each shot, applying liberal doses of talcum powder to everyone's

JAMES BLAND

garments in accordance with some concept that only Billy seems to comprehend. He has never lost the sharp eye for visual detail he acquired as an art student at the University of Texas during the Sixties. Don't let the hillbilly bear fool you: Billy Gibbons is sophisticated and obsessive. He's a chronic insomniac, a true eccentric and an absolute control freak. You can't help but realize this once you've watched the guy yelling for gaffer's tape so that he can stick his shirt collar to the side of his neck at just the right angle.

Gibbons brings the same kind of obsessive energy to his guitar playing. You think those searing pick harmonics and fat slabs of supremely buffed rhythm tone just *happen*? The key to Gibbons' ax artistry is that he makes it all sound so effortless—as smooth and easy as a long-neck Bud after a fiery bowl of five-alarm Texas Chili. Billy explains that ZZ Top were consciously in search of a stripped-down, unstudied sound for *Antenna*:

"*Antenna* was perhaps ZZ Top's first conscious decision to create a concept prior to the commencement of recording. We told ourselves, 'Let's establish a stopping place and not go beyond the sound of a three-piece band playing the blues on the kind of instruments you see here: old, new and in-between guitars. And above all, never introduce a fourth chord into the songs.' "

The finished product is admirably faithful to the initial concept. Oh, there's the occasional conga or Hammond B-3 part. A few discreet synthesizers can even be heard lurking way off in the background—"seasoning," as ZZ Top's bassist Dusty Hill calls them. But for the most part, *Antenna* abounds in bluesy 12-bar guitar workouts and stomping home-style grooves, all rendered with ZZ Top's characteristic polish and panache. Even in his principal guitar selection for the record, Billy went for a stripped-down concept: He mainly played single-pickup Fender Esquires, while Dusty Hill shadowed him on a series of single-pickup Fender P-Bass-style instruments. Propped up on stands, scattered around the room, the matching instruments are also coated in talcum powder. These black lacquered beauties are identical in form features, although personalized by sinuous inlay work and sculpted metal body insets like cyber-pagan jewelry.

"The notion of a single-pickup guitar," Mr. Gibbons philosophizes, "is not too far from that of Einstein's closet, which contained many suits, but all of them were identical. It eliminated the morning decision of what to wear."

On each Esquire, Billy mounted either a stacked Seymour Duncan Pearly Gates pickup or an EMG voiced to produce that Pearly Gates tone. Pearly Gates, of course, is Billy's name for his beloved old '59 Sunburst Gibson Les Paul Standard—an instrument the guitarist calls "one of the cornerstones of ZZ Top's humble beginnings."

That's cool, Billy, but why were you trying to emulate a Gibson sound on a Fender? It must've been quite a task making a bolt-neck guitar do the sonic job of a set-neck instrument.

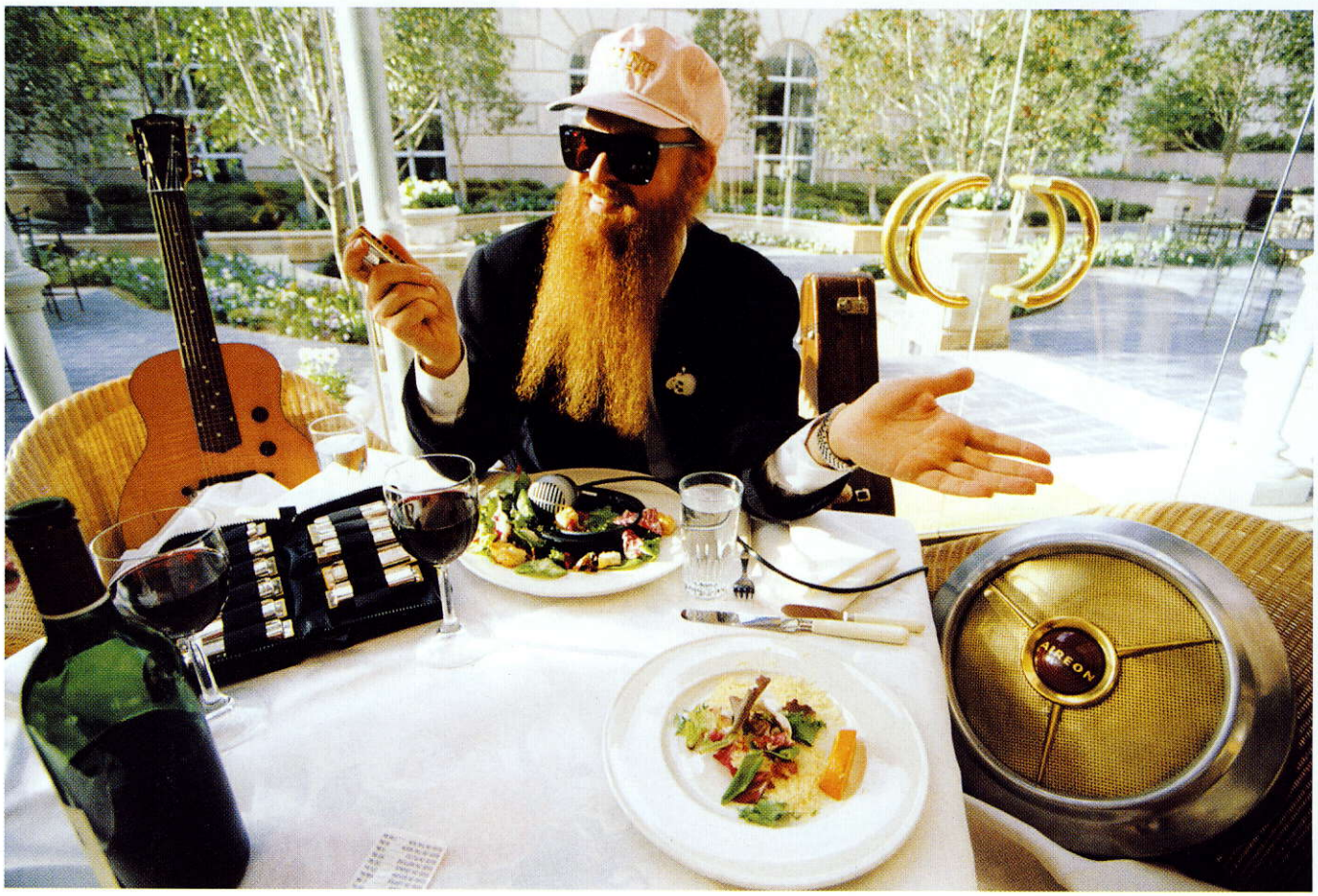
"Correct," the guitarist pronounces. "However, the notion is still that it's either on or off."

Uh, okay. Sure. In conversation, there are times when Billy Gibbons sounds remarkably like Robert Fripp. When he doesn't want to answer a question, he'll offer up some mysterious non sequitur or Zen koan. If you try to press your query, he'll just become more mysterious. When he does this, the underlying message is clear: "Back off, hombre." That's one of the first things you learn about Billy Gibbons and it's indispensable in dealing with him. Which brings us to our second Essential Fact About Billy Gibbons:

2) HE'S ALWAYS LATE

Preparations for the day's photo shoot had begun bright and early inside the band's hotel suite. Lighting gear and backdrops were positioned with exacting care, the models made up, coiffed and corseted to alluring perfection. Then everybody settled in for three hours of an activity well known to everyone within the ZZ Top camp: Waiting for Billy. "For a while, if something was scheduled for two o'clock, we'd tell Billy it was scheduled for twelve o'clock," says a ZZ Top staffer. "But Billy'd be late anyway. He figured that one out *real* quick."

Dusty Hill is the first band member to arrive. He chuckles knowingly on learning



JOHN PEDEN; OPPOSITE: ANN SUMMA

Hill and Gibbons, 1991

that, even though he's over an hour late, he has still beat out Frank and Billy. A squat, amiable biker, Hill is the only member of ZZ Top who really lives up to the band's "good ol' boy" image. He's like one of those ruddy, laughing cavaliers painted by Dutch master Frank Hals, only this cavalier prefers chains and black denim. Dusty seems perfectly content to hang a while and pass the time of day. He shows one of the models his abdominal scars, the result of accidentally shooting himself a few years back. He chats about his kids, relating with dismay how his 16-year-old daughter went through a New Kids on the Block phase and he had to bring her along to a local gig to meet her idols. "So you're the New Kids on the Block?" Dusty demanded of the wholesome teen act. "Well, howdy, I'm the Old Fart Down the Street."

ZZ Top's bassist declares himself happier than a heifer in heat over the band's new album and record label. "RCA had Elvis Presley too," he reminds me. "And anything to do with Elvis, I like."

Drummer Frank Beard is next to arrive. Like Hill, he's wearing cowboy boots with silver toe ornaments that would probably be a tad overwhelming even on the hood of a large automobile. "I didn't realize that...*mmmm*... beauty was on the schedule today," he muses, spying Tina and Susie, the two ZZ Topettes engaged for the day's photographic needs. Apparently, Mr. Beard has much to do with the band's verbal humor—the puns and risqué double entendres that run through their song lyrics. *Antenna* is particularly rich in that department. "Cover Your Rig" is a paean to safe sex, cast as a lecture on the importance of motor vehicle insurance. "Fuzzbox Voodoo" equates the joys of fine guitar equipment with...aw, shucks, figure it out for yourself.

"We all write the lyrics together," says Hill, "but Frank really shines on 'em pretty good."

"Um, so we're waiting for Billy then?" Beard deadpans, sensing the mounting levels of restlessness and exasperation in the room.

Much later, Billy Gibbons whisks into the suite. The first surprise is how incredibly thin he is. He speaks with a sort of nasal precision that contrasts sharply with the slow, deep Texan drawl that issues forth from most of the other men in the room. His arrival triggers a flurry of activity. When Billy's around, there always seems to be 100 things going on at once. He's perpetually in the midst of one or more phone calls. He's forever fishing into pieces of luggage scattered around the room, pulling out props and visual aids more-or-less relevant to the business at hand.. He reaches into one case and hands me...oh, sweet Jesus, Bo Diddley's guitar!

3) JUST LIKE ELVIS, BILLY IS FOND OF GIFTS

It was given to Billy by Bo himself and is thought to be one of only four such guitars in existence. "Check it out," Billy encourages, proffering the red, rectangular-body Gretsch made famous by the mighty father of the backbeat. It's like that scene in the video for "Gimme All Your Lovin'," where Billy and the boys toss the keys of the Eliminator hot rod to the dazzled gas station attendant. My hand trembles with reverence as it passes over the strings, tuned to open D. Billy winks and produces...gulp...still *another* one of Bo Diddley's personal red Gretsches: the curvaceous ax mainly played onstage by Bo's consort, the Duchess. It too was a gift to Billy from Bo and is one of only four such instruments made. "Fortunately, these guitars were sent to Ohio for repair, prior to the burning of the Gretsch factory in Cincinnati," explains Billy, who is just as obsessive about guitar history as he is about everything else. "So they live on."

Billy is equally fond of giving gifts as he is of receiving them. In our time together, he bestows on me a baseball cap from the storied blues joint called the Henry Swing Club, and a rare photo of Elmore James. (Elmore was a key spiritual and musical influence on *Antenna*; Gibbons used the bluesman's open E tuning [E B E Gs B E] on the song "Everything.") It's all highly flattering and fascinating, but one senses that all the gifts, guitars, phone calls and souvenir snapshots are part of a carefully orchestrated diversion. The main point of the whole thing seems to be to deflect attention from the thin, fidgety man who plays guitar for ZZ Top—to keep you from getting too close, asking too many questions. He's like a stage musician. Start acting like you're getting a bead on the real Billy Gibbons and...whoosh, hoo-boy, here's another shiny gewgaw flashing in your eyes.

This is more than a ploy for keeping journalists at bay. It is also the key to the entire image that ZZ Top have masterfully created for themselves in the years since 1983's *Eliminator* album. In a ZZ Top video, the gnarly cars, bodacious babes and other amusements serve to draw attention away from the three musicians. When the boys do appear, they're oddly incognito: hidden behind dingy comic Santa Claus beards, dark glasses and hats, like bad guys on the lam in some Fifties B-movie. It's an inspired send-up of the whole MTV pop process, which generally puts the artist's kisser front and center, a manufactured personality carefully "positioned" to seem as unique and distinctive as possible. This—rather than recorded music—is what the music business took to selling in the MTV era: Madonna. Michael. Prince. The genius of ZZ Top is that they found a way to participate in this wicked commercial game while simultaneously denying it. They deliberately leave the "hero space" blank in

Onstage in 1983

NEIL ZLOZOWER

Gibbons in 1997

MICHAEL SEXTON

their videos and album art.

According to them, of course, the effect wasn't nearly so contrived. "We didn't do any of that stuff to create an image," insists Dusty Hill, who recounts the familiar story of how he and Billy grew their beards unbeknownst to one another during the band's 1976–1979 hiatus. "We brought what we liked from the real world into our videos. We already had the Eliminator car; we didn't build it for the video. And using the girls, that was a real easy decision to make. I didn't hear a 'no' vote anywhere on that one."

Maybe so. But Billy Gibbons' persistently keen visual sense has a lot to do with why that combination of images works so well. Rock stars have been posing with hot cars and pretty girls from Day One. Usually it's extremely tacky, but with ZZ Top, somehow it isn't. Cheap, yes. Tacky, no. They bring a kind of existential irony to the thing—a unique brand of negative cool.

Put it down to Billy's art training or to the psychedelic times in which he came up, but he was hip to the idea of rock staging and visual presentation very early on. His first recording band, the Moving Sidewalks, performed with an elaborate contraption that produced a phosphorescent rain shower at a strategic point in the set.

"That was actually a notion from Jimi Hendrix," Billy explains, "as we accepted the opening slot, followed by the Soft Machine, on Hendrix's 1968 tour. He recommended that we continue this entertaining sort of appearance."

Jimi's advice was certainly taken to heart. It wasn't long after ZZ Top's formation in 1969 that Billy's art experiments began focusing on guitars themselves. "I'd say that started way back in the early Seventies," Dusty Hill recalls. "I remember me and Billy drove up to Dallas, where they had a lot of pawn shops back then, and he spied this old Telecaster bass. I think we only paid 90 bucks for it—a real steal. And when we drove back, we picked up these two girls hitchhiking, and that's how we wrote the song 'Precious and Grace'...but that's another story.

"Anyway, that bass was the first guitar we ever modified. When I played it, I noticed that I either had the volume knob wide open or else completely off between songs. So we took that knob off and got one of those little window cranks—like for the vent window on an older car—and put that on. If you slapped the crank, the volume went all the way on or all the way off. So I'd have to say that window crank was the start of it all."

Everyone knows what followed—a whole sick series of fur-trimmed, mummy-wrapped bizarrely accoutered monstrosities. ZZ Top's stage sets got increasingly demented, too. By the time the *Tejas* tour rolled around in 1976, they were sharing their stage with cattle, buzzards and other critters native to the Lone Star State. What was most brilliant about the whole shtick was that southern boogie bands weren't *supposed* to have a visual sense. Guys who sing about "lookin' for some tush" usually aren't conscious of color schemes. Humble bluesmen aren't supposed to have a marketing strategy. Yet here they were, an absolutely ass-kickin' Texas boogie band with a flair for poking ironic fun at itself and its surroundings. As the Seventies turned into the Eighties, this flair was to prove ZZ Top's saving grace.

But now we're treading on dangerous ground. Time for another indispensable fact about Billy Gibbons.

4) NEVER BRING UP THE OUTLAWS IN HIS PRESENCE

Billy's thumb lands squarely on the "stop" button on my tape recorder. "Don't even *mention* those names," he cautions, brining his shaggy visage up close to mine. I've just made the mistake of alluding to the southern rock boom of the Seventies, observing that one-time FM radio kings like the Marshall Tucker Band and the Outlaws have fallen by the commercial wayside, whereas ZZ Top have endured.

"I think it's just because we still love the music," Billy offers, "both individually and collectively. We still enjoy trying to guess what the other guy's going to do next. Our taste is broad, having been brought up in Texas where there's not much else to do except play—provided you have a porch. We

Performing in 1977

enjoyed country, gospel, Jesus, hillbilly and especially blues. We chose blues as one of the cornerstones of our sound, and that's where we tend to stay."

But back at the dawn of the Eighties, ZZ Top did a radical—some would say a sacrilegious—thing: they started combining blues with electronic dance music—throbbing disco-synth sequences and pounding drum machine pulses. People who view this as a sell-out, a cynical commercial cash-in, are overlooking one very important fact:

5) BILLY GIBBONS REALLY LIKES THAT DISCO STUFF

During the day's photo shoot Billy must have put Ace of Base's "All That She Wants" on the stereo at least a hundred times. Oblivious to all groans of protest, foiling all attempts to hide the cassette from him, the man just *had* to hear that deeply electro-reggae-fied dance track over and over again. Each time that drum machine groove started up, he'd leer approvingly beneath his scraggly beard.

"Dance music offered something that many rock fans chose not to recognize," he says of ZZ Top's early Eighties sonic shift. "And that's *extreme* heaviness. We attempt to remain heavy, not only in the studio but live as well. But we've also noticed that dance music is very heavy, particularly with regard to the bottom end. The lyrics? Eh, well, we'll decide on that later. As for the intended effect—dancing—if you're good on two feet, so much the better. But our main interest is pointed toward the heaviness of dance music. [*dropping his voice an octave*] The *low* sound."

Put it down to the same warped, cross-breeding genius that first thought of attaching auto parts to an electric guitar. Whichever way you care to explain it, the musical blend on *Eliminator* and *Afterburner* proved the perfect soundtrack for the American Saturday Night: plenty of rip-snortin' axwork for the men to play air guitar to, and smooth, sophisticated dance beats for the ladies. "You know, we did seem to get more female fans around that time," Dusty Hill allows. "But then, before that, we were singing songs like, 'Beer Drinkers & Hell Raisers,' and that is kind of more 'guy.' Even though a girl band did that song. I don't think we lost any male fans, but we definitely did get more female fans. The women really seemed to like 'Rough Boy.' "

Some older ZZ Top fans of both genders were slightly miffed by the band's techno phase. Can a bluesman embrace disco and not lose his soul? But a guy as deeply steeped in blues history as Gibbons knows that blues started out as dance music, nocturnal music, dancehall and barroom music, a companion in intoxication, a prelude to intercourse... It shares all those things with modern dance music. So why fault ZZ Top for combining them? Besides, by the dawn of the Nineties the band had already started rethinking its approach.

"Even with *Recycler*, we wanted to go back and draw from the past," says Dusty Hill. "We thought we'd maybe go back to the period of [*1973's*] *Tres Hombres*. We got pretty techno on *Eliminator* and *Afterburner*, which I enjoyed. I think they're good albums, but we wanted to start using the techno element a little more sparingly. We started to go in that direction on *Recycler*, but I don't think we got all the way home on that. But with *Antenna*, I think we've made it. Take a song like 'Cover Your Rig.' It's a straight 6/8 blues. We used to do one of those on every album, and now we're back to that."

"We assumed that our attempt at becoming a synth-pop band was okay," says Billy. "But we chose to follow the many, many requests by legions of ZZ Top fans for a return to something closer to *Tres Hombres* than *Afterburner*. And that meant one thing: never add a fourth chord. Also, no programming is present on the *Antenna* tracks. But in the far, far background, if you listen closely you may find the sound of electronic keyboard instruments."

In keeping with their return to musical roots, *Antenna* was named in honor of the Mexican border radio stations the Toppers listened to as young boys—"influences from the days before we even started playing," Billy volunteers. To make the record, the band journeyed to Ardent Studios in Memphis, the birthplace of many a ZZ Top record. To go with this choice of stripped-down, single-pickup Esquire guitars, Billy relied on four principal amplifiers.

As always, he drew his hirsute, heady tone from both direct sources and miked cabinets. His direct gear for the album included a

NEIL ZLOZOWER

Marshall JMP-1 tube preamp and a Peavey tube preamp. For a miked cabinet sound, he went more vintage. "From Brent Magnano's Guitar Oasis of Huntington Beach, I procured a 50-watt Marshall harkening back to 1964, with two greenback Celestions. The other amp I used is probably the most curious: a Fender Dual Professional. Now considered extremely rare due to its low production number, the Dual Professional was Fender's first amp to offer two speakers. It continued in the line after 1949 or '50 under the name of 'Super.' At the time, Fender made a dual-necked lap steel called the Dual Professional. So when it came time to name this amp, somebody reached into a box and grabbed a fistful of leftover name plates saying Dual Professional. Later on, money was spent to make up nameplates that said Fender Super."

Despite his theories about Einstein's closet, there's no way a vintage guitar hound like Gibbons could stick exclusively with his Esquires through a whole album's worth of recordings. The song "Breakaway," he admits, "was actually performed on a 1936 National 12-fret [*steel acoustic*] with a Baggs pickup attached. It was close-miked, it was recorded direct, *and* it was amplified. The echo was added after the fact by our engineer, Mr. Joe Hardy."

Where does a guy like Billy Gibbons get inspiration for his songs? Well that's one reason why he's so fond of gifts. They provide instant subject matter: "I was the lucky recipient of a very rare stomp box by Marshall called Supa-Fuzz—also a gift from the collector Brent Magnano. That became the inspiration for the song 'Fuzzbox Voodoo.' Although it does, indeed, as you discerned, have two meanings."

Inspiration struck again the day after ZZ Top appeared at the W.C. Handy Blues Awards in Memphis, where they presented Entertainer of the Year honors to Buddy Guy. "It was the very next day that my neon sign called 'two-foot doorman'—my chin whiskers, that is—drew the attention of a stranger," Billy narrates with an air of mystery. "It was a gentleman who took a moment to recognize ZZ Top as being Memphis' adopted sons. Knowing we love the South, the blues and Memphis' rather special label called Stax, he asked if he would accept his gift to us: It was a pack of matches, the old fold-over cardboard kind, from Stax Records. It included the Stax logo and the slogan, 'Where Everything Is Everything.' That became our conceptual idea for the song called 'Everything.' The paradox there is that, while the words include everything, the music is very spare: drums only, with Mr. Hill playing just one note on a Hammond B-3. This B-3, by the way, is the very historic instrument belonging to Mr. Booker T. Jones. It's the one that was used on 'Green Onions' and all those records.

"In the middle of 'Everything' there's a guitar solo that employs the Texas Lightnin' Hopkins 'I'm-not-gonna-put-my-hand-on-the-neck-I'm-just-gonna-thrash-it' technique. At the conclusion of this rather ironic track, everything does, indeed, become everything. There's Elmore James–style slide, the sound of a mule which we were given by a farmer who had a tape recorder, a cowbell, congas, a wind chime, a Cuban fish...so everything becomes everything, you see?"

6) NOT EVEN BILLY GIBBONS CAN ALWAYS HAVE EVERYTHING

"Naked!"

It's very late. Lack of sleep has finally caught up with Billy Gibbons. He's barely able to keep his eyes open. But one last visual concept seems to have lodged itself firmly in his brain. He wants *Guitar World*'s cover girl to disrobe for a nude shot. For the past 10 minutes, he's been yelling one word over and over again.

"Naked!"

Tina, however, is having none of it.

"Aw, it'll be okay," he pleads. "You can face backward."

"I ain't gittin' naked and facin' *any* direction."

"Half naked then."

"I already *am* half naked."

"Three-quarters naked?"

"I already am three-quarters naked!"

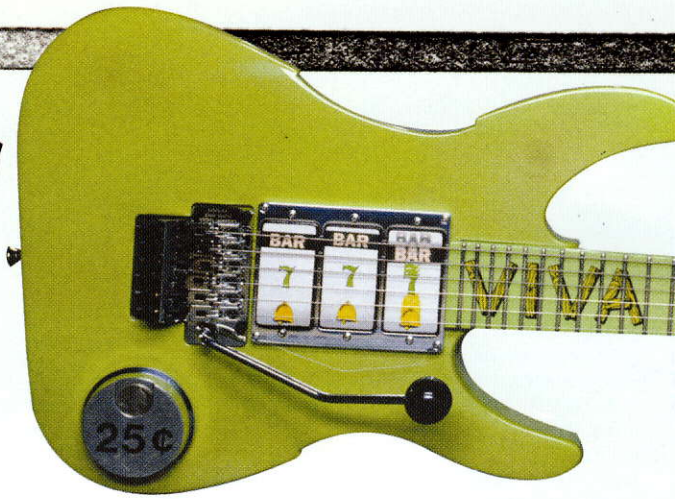
"Oh."

Ah, well. Will it be necessary to reinvent ZZ Top all over again for the Nineties?

"Very probably," Billy replies. "Very probably."

Z GUITAR

"This guitar is seen here in the shape of a 'Z'. However it has a folding mechanism that turns it into the shape of a 'V'. It was designed by Gibson guitar specialist Matthew Klein and manufactured at the Gibson plant."



CASIO GUITAR

"A Casio guitar arrived on our doorstep one day, with the invitation to try it out. We never did, but it looks good. Can't afford the batteries."

GENESIS GUITAR

"The Genesis guitar is a handy item because it's got a couple of holes cut in the body and it's easy to carry. It was manufactured by someone we don't know. But we didn't mind. We just dig those handy handles."

RED RUSSIAN/ BLACK RUSSIAN

"These were a gift from two Russian rockers. They were given to ZZ Top sometime between 1990 and '92, before the Berlin Wall came down. They could probably be played, but we can't seem to find a cord that fits them. We suspect they use a DIN plug instead of a quarter-inch jack. Very weird. Very Russian-like."

TWELVE-STRING MEXICAN

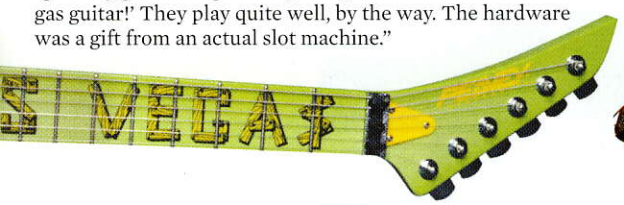
"This is a Mexican guitar with 12 strings, called a *bajo sexto*. Difficult to play, according to some. We don't know how. We don't know even how to tune it, nor do we choose to. We enjoy border music—*conjunto* sounds—and for us, this is a reminder of what we enjoy. It was purchased in San Antonio, in a music/furniture store that has since closed."

MUMMY GUITAR

"An Explorer in shape, covered in gauze and featuring the Sony Watchman. Like the Z guitar, the Mummy guitars were created by Matthew Klein at Gibson. They're used in the video for 'Sleeping Bag.' "

VIVA LAS VEGAS

"The Viva Las Vegas guitars were created in Meridian, Mississippi, where you can throw dice or go by the Peavey specialty guitar shop and say, 'Hey, make me a Viva Las Vegas guitar!' They play quite well, by the way. The hardware was a gift from an actual slot machine."

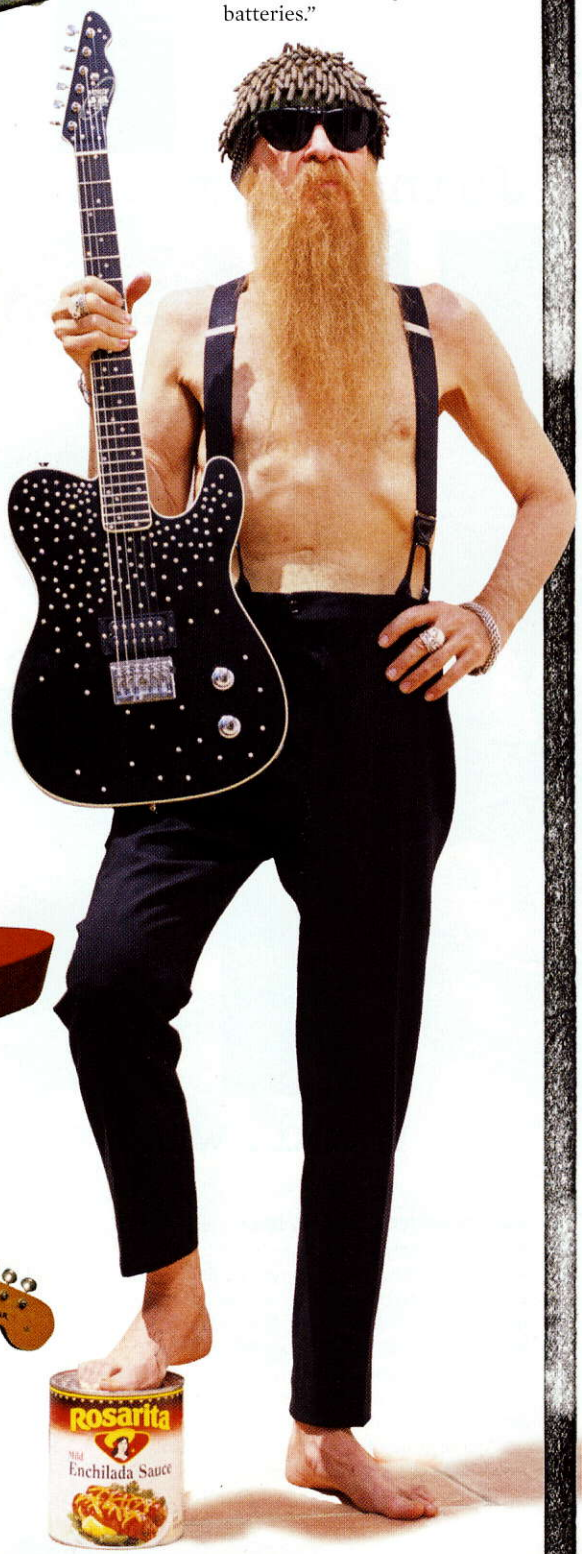


ONE-STRING GUITAR

"This is kind of homemade. It was a gift from Willie the Workingman, the engineer at ZZ Top's Texas recording studio. It still works. But there again, we need batteries."

THE GOOD, THE RAD & THE UGLY

The erudite, enigmatic Mr. Gibbons offers his comments on 10 of the most bizarre items in his prodigious guitar collection. by Alan di Perna



LA WARPA

"A rather odd-looking guitar in the flavor of orange. The name 'La Warpa' identifies its curved body: it's concave on one side and convex on the other. You can hear this one on 'My Head's in Mississippi.' "

FENDER JAGUAR

"Believe it or not, we still have a Jag lurking in our stable. This particular instrument is the second guitar I ever owned, and can be heard on 'PCH,' on *Antenna*. It features a single Seymour Duncan Pearly Gates pickup in the bridge position and a VU meter where the neck pickup probably would've existed. It also features a painting of a Rick surfboard. I don't know what that has to do with anything, but it's there."

THE HOARD TOUR

Join Billy Gibbons on a fabulous odyssey across the globe in search of guitars wild, weird and wonderful. **BY CHRIS GILL**

SUPER BOWL SUNDAY, 1997. I am about to settle into my favorite La-Z-Boy to watch the game when, to my annoyance, the phone rings. Much to my surprise, on the line is none other than Billy F. Gibbons, frontman for the acclaimed Texas trio ZZ Top. The band is scheduled to appear at the half-time show, and all the excitement and hoopla has apparently given Gibbons a case of guitar fever.

"We're goin' on a guitar safari. Wanna join?" asks the great bearded one.

"Does a '53 Les Paul have a Goldtop finish?" I reply.

"Good. ZZ Top's *Rhythmeen* tour is picking up in Eastern Europe in a few days. Meet me in Moscow. Thursday. High noon."

"Wait," I plead. "What are we hunting?"

"Exotic breeds. Endangered beasts. The works."

A few days later, in the aftermath of the Green Bay Packers' great victory, I find myself on the red-eye rocket to Russia. Stepping out of the plane, I scan the airport waiting room for Gibbons, but not a single pair of Ray Bans is to be seen. Suddenly, a sultry young woman in a leopard-skin jacket catches my attention. She is holding a sign reading, " '59 'Burst, Cheap." This has to be my liaison.

The lady leads me to a Mercedes limo and opens the door. "My name is Corinna," she coos in a voice as sweet as Clapton's Cream-era woman tone. As I settle into the handsomely upholstered back seat, she reaches over and hands me a pamphlet entitled "Gibbonics—The Official Language of Guitar Connoisseurs." "You'll be needing this as well," she says, slipping me an envelope filled with money from various countries—dollars, yen, marks and rubles.

MICHAEL SEXTON

Reprinted from GUITAR WORLD, November 1997

Gibbons with Les Pauls, in 1997

A few minutes later we pull up in front of Boris Kaganov's Axe Shack. Hopping out of the Mercedes, I spy a gnarly, Russian-made sonic surfboard in the shack's window—burnt-cheese-ocher finish, clamp-mount pickup arrangement and non-innerplanetary connecting jacks. "Isn't she fine?" says a familiar baritone voice. I turn around and there stands Billy F. Gibbons in the flesh, his beard flapping in the frozen wind.

"The girl or the guitar?" I retort. "Both are first class." I kiss my fingers for emphasis.

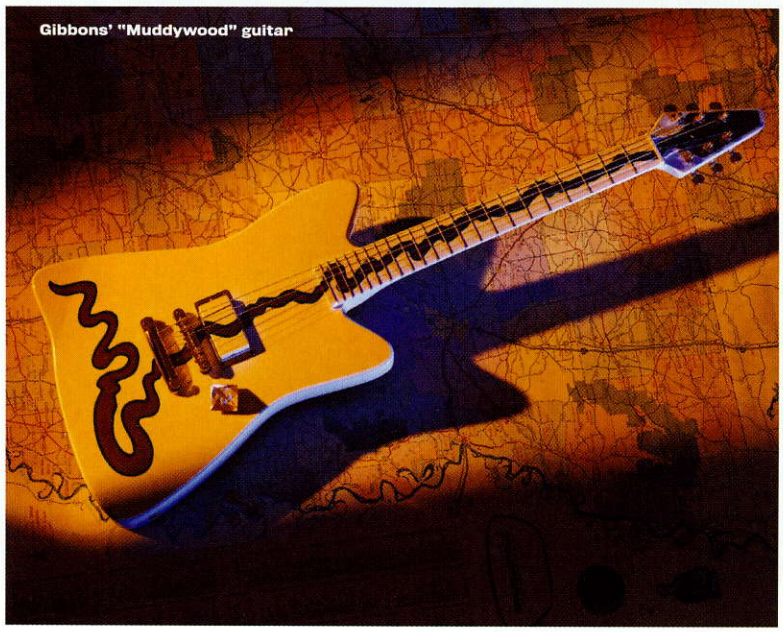
"Oh dude, these guitars are out there!" says Gibbons. "They sound, well—Russian. Of course, there's tons of them around here. Step inside. Let's take a look around."

As we set foot inside the shop, we're met by Comrade Kaganov himself, who leads us to a backroom overstocked with sundry Communist-era oddities: Glasnostcasters, Telesputniks and the like. Gibbons and I settle into two huge, overstuffed chairs.

"You know, the real reason I'm here is to talk to you about 'guitar madness,' " I say.

"I'll gladly respond to any inquiry about my particular fave-rave six-string thangs," says Gibbons.

With that word of encouragement, we are on our way. A wild, bumpy ride, for sure.



Gibbons' "Muddywood" guitar

GUITAR WORLD What got you started on your quest for guitars?

BILLY F. GIBBONS Let's start at the beginning. It was the sound of blues music that we heard in the mid Sixties that really centered our interest. When I speak of blues from this period, it was not only American blues artists but the British interpreters as well. That draws us to one of the most recognizable icons of Sixties British blues: the John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers album [Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton, *released in 1965*], with Eric Clapton on guitar and the famous photograph on the back cover showing Clapton playing a sunburst Les Paul and a Marshall amplifier.

At the time, I had been playing Fender Esquires, Jazzmasters, Jaguars and Stratocasters. It was mostly a single-coil Fender game. The Les Paul was less than popular then. We suspected that double-humbucking pickups were the source of that Clapton sound. A friend of mine called and said, "I've got an instrument with two humbucking pickups." It turned out to be a Flying V. That was our first entry into the humbucking world.

GW Shortly thereafter you found Pearly Gates [*Gibbons' '59 sunburst Les Paul Standard*] and, as they say, the rest is history.

GIBBONS Indeed.

GW Having found the perfect guitar, why did you continue to acquire them?

GIBBONS Pearly has such an unmistakable character that we felt it was necessary to find another instrument with a similar sound to use as a spare guitar. We accumulated dozens of guitars, but nothing quite matched her. But instead of tossing these other acquisitions away, they kept accumulating. It's an ongoing saga that never ends.

GW What kind of guitars did you accumulate?

GIBBONS Just about anything that had these famous humbucking pickups. You had these oddball, pointy things like the Flying "V" and the Explorer. Those, too, had great sound. They came from 1958 and had taller and skinnier fret wire and a little bit different feel. Then we started finding things like the [*Gibson*] ES-5 Switchmaster with not one, not two, but *three* humbuckers and a toggle switch with a setting that says "All." That's when it started getting really whacked.

GW I've heard rumors that Jimi Hendrix gave you a pink Stratocaster back in those days.

GIBBONS It was just before we formed ZZ Top. Frank Beard [*drummer*] and Dusty Hill [*bassist*] were working in Dallas with the American Blues, and my band, the Moving Sidewalks, had been hired to open some shows for Jimi Hendrix. At that time I said, "Here's the master of the Stratocaster." That domain really belongs to him. Here was an example of a player who not only developed some skills on chord structure and new chord positionings for rock music but was also really squeezing things out of a simple guitar and amplifier setup that had not been written about in any manual. As far as I know, he was the first exponent of playing a Stratocaster in the "in-between" toggle-switch setting.

At that time, Fender supported what he was doing as an artist. He really didn't mind playing new, out-of-the-box guitars. Fender was sending out stacks of them; I remember he once got 17 different cartons from them. They were coming fast and furious at him with new guitars, but he had a few oldies and goodies. I acquired the pink one, a late-Fifties Strat, during our time together.

Suddenly, our conversation is interrupted when Corinna bursts into the room. "Mr. Gibbons!" she shouts. "Elwood called on the cellular phone. He's located a Missing Link guitar!"

"Most excellent," replies Gibbons. "I'm afraid we'll have to continue our conversation at a later date. Why don't we meet up in Halle?"

"In the former East Germany?"

"You got it."

★★★★★

It's a grey winter's day in Halle. The temperature is about 10 below zero, not counting the wind-chill factor. As I make my way to the back entrance of the town's Konzert Hall, I'm stopped by an armed security guard brandishing a machine gun. Shaking, I flash my credentials, and he nods and points at a concrete door.

Inside, I'm greeted by the sight of Gibbons exhaling a cloud of steam. "Hey," he says, choking. "I just swallowed a mouthful of Tabasco-ridden soup. It took my breath away. I'm lovin' it!"

Standing at his side is a tall, thin fellow with a neon-green Sid Vicious haircut. "Meet Mr. Elwood Francis," says Gibbons. Currently employed as Gibbons' guitar tech, Francis, explains Gibbons, is his chief conspirator in guitar madness. Francis and Gibbons are co-originators of a new approach to guitar design which advocates the use of "found materials." Executing designs from their West Coast studio, Slab 7 Studiosa, they plan on unleashing their Pacifiko models on an unsuspecting public soon.

"Welcome to Halle," says Elwood. "We've renamed it 'Helle.' "

"Helleva place they got here," I deadpan.

"We're thrashed, brother," says Gibbons. "This is our fifth gig in a row. It's so cold and desolate here. But hey, the local folks are trying. They're making attempts to have a good time. Can't beat that. We could be on a 10-day run with enthusiasm like this."

At Gibbons' prompting, the three of us convene in a tiny backstage room that currently serves as storage for Gibbons' and Francis' ever-expanding guitar collections. Guitars and amps are stacked to the ceiling. In a matter of minutes, the Gibbonics is flying fast and furious. (The guitars you are now going to read about are real. Even the names are the same, so protect your wallet.)

★★★★★

GW You've had a number of custom guitars built over the years. What was the first?

GIBBONS Donald Summers, the bass player for the Moving Sidewalks, built guitars in his garage. He had some of the first unusual

JOHN PEDEN

At Yello-Belly Drag Strip, near Grand Prairie, Texas, 1994

hot-rod guitars. He was a master—Flying V basses and all kinds of modified applications. Not only tastefully done, but functional. From there things really started getting bizarre.

GW Describe some of your famous custom guitars and the ideas behind them.

ELWOOD FRANCIS The stuff from the Scientifico Musico Technographique company down South in Virginia is full-tilt, weird, Bigsby-styled Forties-era design discoveries.

GIBBONS Oh yeah. Most weird. And then there's the strange work of [*luthier*] James Trussart: all French-made full customs, made in Paris, inspired by the metal-bodied designs of the 1930's Nationals, only modified into a sort of Fender-esque hot rod. His new Rust-O-Rama corrosion technique is stunning and just as surprising as, say, the invention of the metal airplane. Sounds as smooth as a Barry White recording.

The new House of JB guitars from the House of JB Customs are also great. All natural-fiber composition and complete recklessness when it comes to observing speed limits. Fine pearl "inlay" for the fashion conscious...as we all are. Call him.

FRANCIS The Delta Blues Museum's custom "Muddywood" is seeing quite a bit of action on the ZZ Top Continental Safari *Rhythmeen* tour. A most generous loan and a most inspirational war club.

GIBBONS Yeah, all of our one-off, ZZ Top six-string electric Spanish guitars and basses are outfitted for 24-hour field use. Even the special axes fabricated for MTV videos rip with tone terror. They're all equipped with some badass monstrous tone generators from Seymour Duncan's line. The Duncan Antiquities absolutely smoke. Makes all the difference in these rare, off-the-wall customs.

GW What is the most bizarre ax in your lineup?

GIBBONS Certainly one of the most bizarre slabs lately are any of the imports being bootlegged out of India under the name "Givson." Amazing.

FRANCIS I've got my Givson—a lap steel. Only goes to "8." Must be something to it.

GIBBONS If you can score one of the Givson Esquires in Pyramid Purple, get a half dozen, mixed. What they gonna say in Dallas 'cept, "Play it, brother!"

GW What are your most recent acquisitions?

FRANCIS A pair of Bond, as in James Bond, guitars offered by Gulfcoast Guitars in Florida. We're looking forward to exploring the extreme on this pair, as not only are they obscure but from England as well. A sure plus. Keith Richards is from England...the coolest. And these sticks have no frets, which means, of course, no wrong notes. Gotta have it!

GIBBONS Gil Southworth [*of Southworth Guitars in Bethesda, Maryland*] dug up a couple of Melody Makers. They're fine—not "Givsons," though, unfortunately. They're Gibson, around '62 or '63. Rich 'burst finish in pure lacquer, extremely rare tortoise guard, hat-box knobs in see-through clear, single-cutaway, factory-installed deluxe machine heads and a fake 'gator-print pressboard case, with handle.

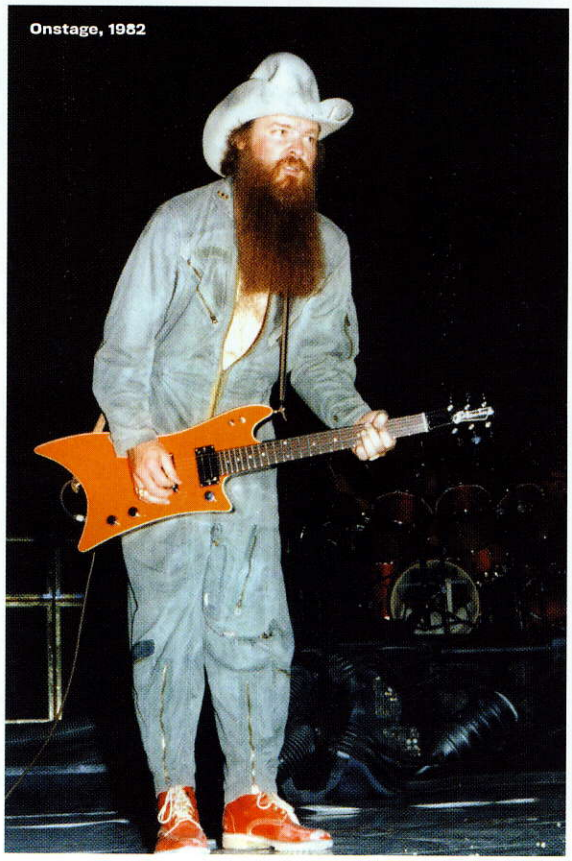
GW Is there some sort of modus operandi to this habit of acquisition?

FRANCIS Search and destroy.

GIBBONS Scattershot.

GW Have any particularly strange, cosmic or divine transactions gone down?

GIBBONS Yeah. A transaction did take place at Second-Hand Joe, in Johannesburg, South Africa. Elwood keen-eyed a clap-trap tin shack down a side alley en route to the Jo-burg gig. The signage showed a large painted hand, palm-side outstretched, next to the number "2" and the name Joe with a homemade outline of a Telecaster. Killer find. Six new-in-the-box Gibson ES-295s, all gold with humbuckers and tags, eight left-handed fake Strats from the Philippines, maple neck, new-in-box as well, plus three Gibson angle-front stereo amps, also new-in-the-box. All "new," from Second-Hand Joe. No straps.


Onstage, 1982

FRANCIS Yeah, I like Joe. He took my dough.

GW What are the rarest and oddest axes in your possession?

GIBBONS Well, the absolute most weird are the HeliumZZ. They, well...almost levitate. They've got this inner bladder with a check-valve loading spigot for force-thrust injection of helium or other gaseous chemicals. The instruments have a thin-skinned body membrane in place of the more traditional wood body. The result remains nearly unmanageable. They're neck-heavy, the bodies undulate and flex unpredictably, and they have a tendency to want to float away.

GW What one guitar would you consider the Holy Grail?

FRANCIS I believe it's probably one's "first" instrument. That's usually the firestarter. Ain't nothin' like that first time.

GIBBONS Most definitely. First time's the killer. Of course, there's always, always something around the corner.

GW What's the best guitar you've ever owned?

FRANCIS All of 'em.

GIBBONS Pearly.

GW Describe some of the guitars used for the making of *Rhythmeen*.

FRANCIS This oughta be good. There's a bunch, Brougham.

GIBBONS Yeah, the *Rhythmeen* got mucho. First track cut with Pearly. 'Nuff said. Then, [*producer and recording engineers*] Mr. Joe Hardy and Mr. G.L. "G-Mane" Moon suggested I slam on my '55 Gibson Les Paul Goldtop with P-90 pickups to match the famous photo of Muddy Waters in Chess Studios.

FRANCIS Deluxe diversion.

GIBBONS All right! Yeah, P-90...rear pickup only! Crackin' into the track "Bang Bang" on the '55er...serial number 6 0091. Hardtail. Then it was on to a 1956 Fender Esquire, tracks four and five. Barbecued.

FRANCIS The Howlin' Wolf Silvertone with built-in speaker...make that "Silver Tone," 'cuz it's actually a Teisco. It's the one seen on the Howlin' Wolf boxed set. Devilish item.

GIBBONS Some Gretsch [*Bo Diddley's 1960 rectangle*], some Goldtop and some more Pearly.

FRANCIS Mostly Pearly.

GIBBONS Got to!

FRANCIS Lots of this stuff from *Rhythmeen* is mysterious-like, because those lowdown, substrata tunings chase the character. [*Gibbons tuned several of his guitars down to C for a few songs, with .008 strings, no less.*]

GIBBONS No doubt. And Elwood's specialty tunings truly make the most familiar guitar a stranger! Lowdown in sound town.

GW What are some other equipment finds your fans can check up on?

GIBBONS Uh, the Bixonic Expandora pedal—an unmerciful orange squeezer of tone. And ya gotta have the Z.Vex effect pedals. Elegant. They come wrapped in a gas station shop rag! Adds to the effect. Airline Dan at Airline Guitars in Houston, Texas, has created a working model of another Slab 7 Studios design: the Missing Link. Aw, man! No description attempted.

FRANCIS The Roadrunner Supersonic fuzz box. That's from Roadrunner Guitars in Paris. And it's just good, old thick fuzz. Hell, get it all.

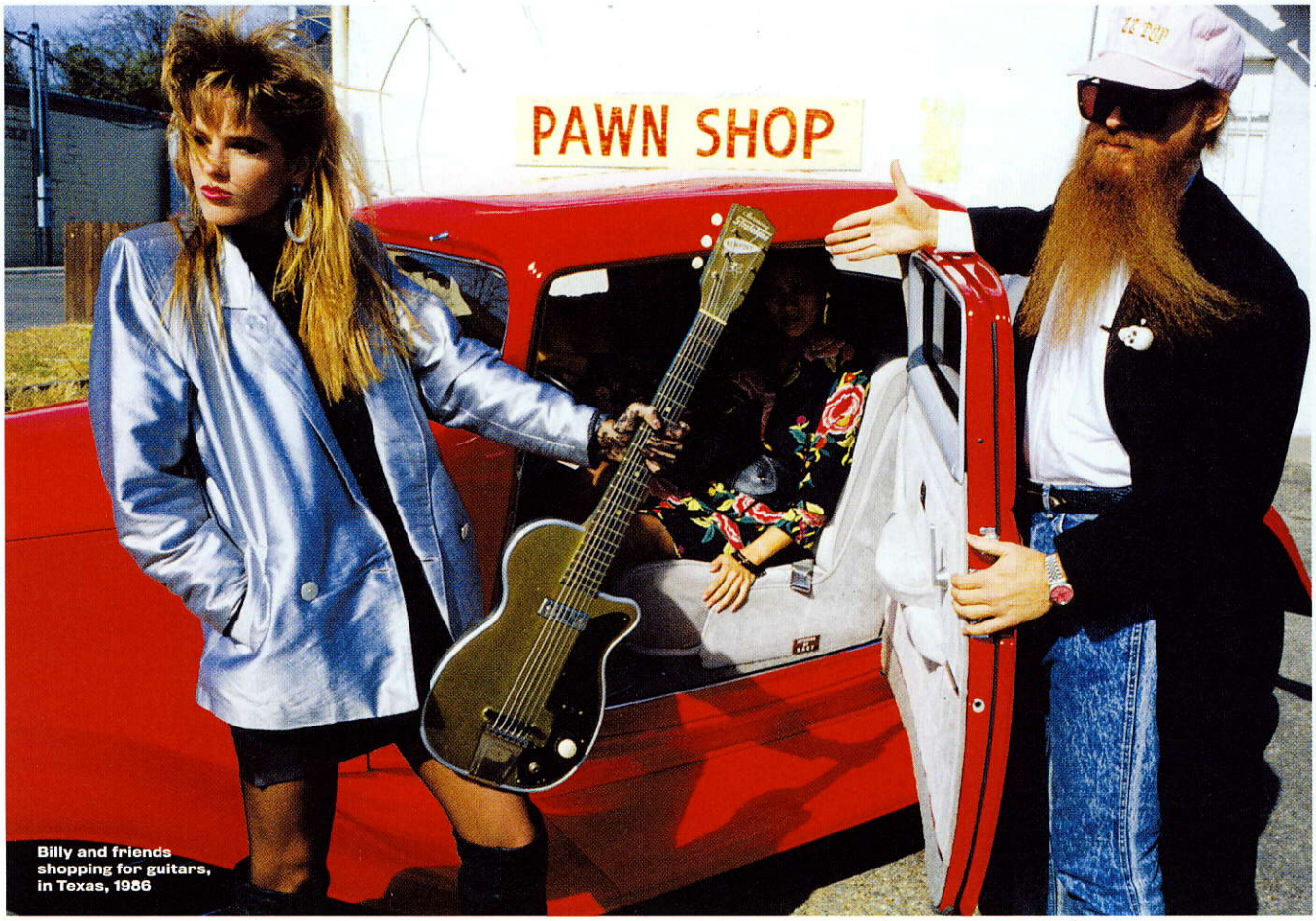
GW Any advice for the passionate player?

BOTH Distort...then go buy our records, again. [*uproarious laughter*]

★★★★★

Once again, the conversation is interrupted. Showtime. Gibbons, Hill and Beard take the stage and proceed to rock the East Germans to

NEIL ZLOZOWER



Billy and friends shopping for guitars, in Texas, 1986

Halle. Tommorow: Munich.

Ah, Munich—charming mountain outpost of the Bavarian republic and headquarters for Europe's finest breweries. The air is literally perfumed with the bodacious bouquet of beer. I've received instructions to meet Mr. Billy in his hotel room. As I knock on his door, it swings open, and there is Gibbons sitting in a hard-backed chair, talking on the telephone. Strewn across his bed are sundry CDs—Barkmarket, Reef, Neil Young's *Dead Man* soundtrack and a few old Paul Butterfield Blues Band releases.

"Let's see," says Gibbons into the mouthpiece. "Pearly Gates. She's got pedigree, celebrity status, was played at the Super Bowl. How much you think I can get for her?"

"Don't do it!" I yell, wrestling the receiver from his hand and hanging up.

"That was Sotheby's," chuckles Gibbons. "Don't worry. I just wanted to rattle their cage. I've no intention of parting with Pearly."

I am relieved, to say the least. It's hard to imagine a ZZ Top album that won't be graced with Pearly's presence. And so, we proceed to our final round of questioning.

★★★★★

GW Mr. Billy, what can you tell us of your first guitar—the "first one"—and its effect on you?

GIBBONS The "effect" is the word! Man, Christmas Day, high noon, the unwrapping, and by sundown the full-tilt "slab-slapping"! The "effect" took the electricity from the body to guitar through amplifier and on into atmosphere. There was no turnin' back as far as the "effect" was concerned. Nor *moi*.

GW Which of the guitars currently being made are the classics of tomorrow?

GIBBONS I don't really know, but the tone will tell the tale. The Big T. Anderson outfit of California meticulously manufactures a massively moving machine. So does Gibson. So does Fender. And Len McRae and Hartley [*Peavey*] have a real hot steam engine crankin' stuff out of the heart of Mississippi. The real sleepers are the made-in-the-dark specials by players, themselves. Eddie Van Halen's shop-work applications have enriched the popularity of personalizing an instrument and gone into the production lines with amazing outcome.

GW What is the ugliest guitar you've ever beholden? And the most beautiful?

GIBBONS Ah...One and the same. Don Leady from Austin, fronting guitar chores with the Tail Gators, snagged this one uptight. He has a custom-made bolt-together that we saw backstage at "Jimmy's," down in New Orleans. Sort of a cryptic "Essence of Jaundice Green" and a purple-and-white swirled-pearl scratch plate. Bass man Keith [*Ferguson*] referred to it as reminiscent of heartworms and grape jelly. A new contemporary beauty.

GW If you had only $100 to spend on an ax, what would you buy and why?

GIBBONS I'd be willin' to throw down a "C" on any solidbody outfitted with a rear-position pickup. Don't even have to work. Grocery sack for a case, some spare change for a couple of Radio Shack leads and a furious fuzz box. Killer combo for your stack of greenbacks.

GW What is the cheapest/most expensive guitar you've ever bought?

GIBBONS Cheapest and most expensive? Probably a pair of homemades picked up at auction. They came through the Sotheby's tribal sale in Johannesburg. I was fightin' high bid from some cat that didn't play, didn't wanna play, but wanted to "slug it out" in the gallery. He outbid me, but in the end he didn't have enough pesos to pay the man, so the pieces wound up back on the street. Later that evening I ran into the chap that originally offered the pieces, just wanting to make some spare change. We settled with a figure that doubled the auction bid—a fair trade for the both of us. I got a great couple of style mongers that this guy basically chiseled out of a Korina tree from his bush village. Expensive, yes, but cheap in the end.

GW What developments do you foresee in the electric guitar's future?

GIBBONS More knobs. Bigger knobs. Bigger tone. And probably much, much louder. There's a famous saying...well, kinda famous... which goes, "Anyone can rebuild a guitar, but it takes a real man to cut one up." Long as there's some thrashin' goin' on, we'll be fine, fine, fine. Chop the broccoli, brother.

JOHN PEDEN

A TEXAN IN NEW YORK

As ZZ Top prepared to release their 1999 album, the rockin' and raunchy *XXX*, *Guitar World* spent a long and fascinating night on the town with Billy Gibbons. **by Alan di Perna**

2:47 A.M., ST. MARK'S PLACE, EAST VILLAGE, NEW YORK CITY

"Hey ZZ, rock on!" These words, shouted from a passing car, greet Billy F. Gibbons as he emerges from a corner newsstand and strides to a waiting limo. With Billy's famous Two-Foot Doorman (one of the man's many odd names for his beard), it would be hard for a passerby *not* to recognize ZZ Top's eccentric, urbane guitarist, particularly on a street that's all but deserted here in the small hours of the morning. But for Billy, this unsolicited exhortation to "rock on" has an almost occult significance. It underscores a point he's been making all evening. Back in the limo, he leans in close and speaks low:

"I'm hearing a lot of scuttlebutt saying that rock music is back. People just wanna rock again. And it's really gonna be wild this go-around, because all the elements left over from whatever was hot on the charts last week are going to be mixed in. Of course, rap and rock have been shown to be able to live together. So we might get this real wacky collision that's just totally crazed. The wilder the better, I think."

ZZ Top's *XXX* certainly does rock. Released in 1999, at the time of this story, the disc's eight studio tracks and four live cuts are lavishly doused with some of the lowdown nastiest guitar work ever to emanate from the formidable Mr. Gibbons. And *XXX* certainly is wild. At times the textures go all grainy and distressed, and beats occasionally loop off into the urban jungle, but the whole thing remains unmistakably ZZ Top. That little old band from Texas has become one of rock's most enduring and strangest concepts. That's the best way to put it. For all his prowess as a guitarist, Billy F. is first and foremost a conceptualist: a surrealist bluesman, a gentleman collector of cultural artifacts—clothes, cars, gadgets and sounds—that somehow all have a place in the world of ZZ Top.

"Three X" is the correct way to say the title band's album. "It means many different things," Billy says. As he points out, it could be taken as an acknowledgment that the year of its release marks ZZ Top's 30th Anniversary. "It's also the name of a great beer. It could mean poison, or a particular type of video entertainment..."

Billy's mind works in unusual ways, generally moving in several different directions all at once. So it was arranged for me to spend an entire evening in his company, cruising Manhattan after dark in a black Lincoln Town Car. Who knows what insights might emerge?

Maybe we should start at the beginning of the evening, six hours earlier.

9:40 P.M., RIHGA ROYAL HOTEL, WEST SIDE

Billy is looking remarkably crisp for a guy who got off the plane from Texas just an hour ago. The Sharp Dressed Man personified, he's wearing an immaculately cut blue designer suit, but his choice of accessories is...well... slightly left of *GQ*. There are loads of Mexican silver wrist bangles, a gold Rolls-Royce lapel pin, a bright red silk pocket square with white polka dots. The crowning glory is a most unusual red-and-green hat—part beret, part shower cap—crowded with 3/4-inch cloth nubs, like dreadlocks just starting to grow in.

"Our new trademark African hat," Billy announces. "Funny dreadlock hat. Cowboy meets Africa."

The hat ties in, albeit obliquely, with a song on *XXX* called "Dreadmonboogaloo," a jaunty instrumental that successfully combines reggae, blues, techno, talk radio, flying saucers and a cheesy organ. It's much like Billy's wardrobe, a mad jumble of unlikely items that ought not

DALE MAY

Reprinted from GUITAR WORLD, December 1999

Gibbons in 2003

to work together, yet somehow do. And as we leave the Rihga, Billy's headgear is like a beacon, drawing every autograph hound on 54th Street. He patiently and cheerfully signs his name and poses for pictures. Then we're off.

10:30 P.M., IRIDIUM JAZZ CLUB, WEST SIDE

Billy leans toward me in a conspiratorial manner: "I'm not gonna sit in. We're just here to observe tonight, okay?"

Guitar legend Les Paul and his trio have a regular Monday night residency at Iridium. Billy smiles through yet another round of autographs and snapshots at the door. Then we're shown to some seats. The club is crowded and the seating is communal, with audience members packed cheek by jowl at long rows of tables like something out of an ancient Norman banqueting hall. "No private table," I find myself wincing. "This is gonna be weird."

But it's not. Within seconds, Billy is the best of friends with the guys seated near him—fellow Texans, it turns out. They're soon comparing notes on Austin nightspots. Billy has a great ability to put people at ease. He can read them quickly and zero in on some area of common interest. As he's interested in just about *everything*, this isn't too hard. Everyone's having a good time, but Billy is holding firm on one point:

"I'm not sitting in."

Five minutes later, he's up onstage with a Gibson Les Paul model strapped around his neck, the grinning object of "beard" jokes ad-libbed by Les Paul himself. (Example: "Man, how'd you get that terrible fungus?") Les is 84. Whether it's a put-on or not, he seems to be only dimly aware of who Billy is. "Do you have a band?" he asks. "What are some of your songs?" Audience members pitch in. "Cheap Sunglasses"! "Sleeping Bag"!

"We do lots of songs about, um, anatomy," Billy deadpans. "There's one called 'Legs.' And we have another called 'Tush.' I guess we're working our way up."

The two guitar greats duet on a breezy 12-bar blues. The blues is a language that Billy speaks fluently in all its many dialects. In homage to his host, Billy tells the story of his most beloved Les Paul guitar, Pearly Gates, a sunburst '59 Gibson Custom that looms large in ZZ Top lore. The narrative is pure Billy: fast paced, with many tangled threads. But it possesses all the essentials of a classic ZZ Top video. There's a woman, in this case a friend of Billy's who wanted to go to Hollywood and become an actress. There's a car, a vintage yet barely roadworthy vehicle that Billy gives his friend for her journey westward. (The automotive gift is another essential ingredient in ZZ Top mythology. Gleaming car keys are invariably tossed to deserving protagonists.) The girl makes it to L.A., finds success, sells the car at way under market value and sends the money to Billy, who resignedly uses it to purchase the aforementioned '59 Les Paul from a Texas farmer. Since the car had been named Pearly Gates, that becomes the guitar's name, too. With this instrument, ZZ Top is founded. End of story.

Another 12-bar, a few more jokes and Billy's back in his seat. All the facial hair in the world couldn't conceal his ear-to-ear grin. Not gonna sit in, eh?

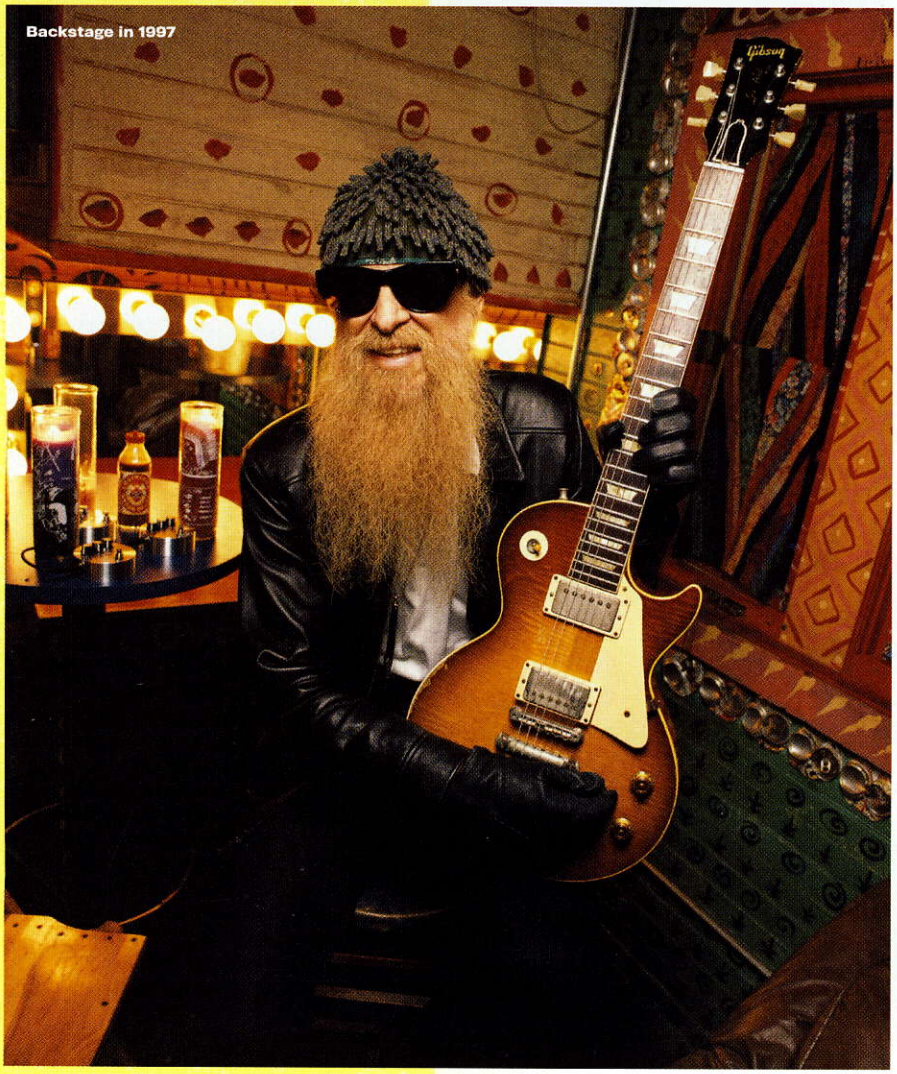
"Aw come on, it's *Les*, man! How could I refuse?"

The L.A./Texas connection is an important one in Billy's own life story. The son of a musician, he grew up around Hollywood, Las Vegas and Texas, the three places where his father worked most frequently. His family tree also includes noted film set designer, art director and studio exec Cedric Gibbons, creator of the Academy Award's Oscar statuette. The art gene was passed on to Billy, who earned a degree in the subject from the University of Texas during the Sixties. Yes, the big ol' beard and wild shitkicker image is, in Billy's case, something of a facade. Or rather, a kind of surrealist exaggeration of just one aspect of the man's sociomusical background.

Billy tried combining visual art with rock and roll in his pre-ZZ band, the Moving Sidewalks, who were known for their elaborately psychedelic stage effects. Shortly after, he met Frank Beard and Dusty Hill. The drummer and bassist had already jelled as a rhythm section, having played together in countless Texas bar bands and the group American Blues, whose two albums, *American Blues Do Their Thing* and *American Blues Is Here*, are still a source of embarrassment for the duo. But nobody was embarrassed when Beard and Hill teamed up with Gibbons.

"I attribute a lot to Frank and Dusty," Mr. Gibbons declares. "Their cohesiveness as a rhythm section. The real functioning cornerstone, the backbone, of any music is the rhythms. And in the case of *XXX*, Dusty and Frank have learned to create something, in many instances, by way of subtraction. There is a lot of spareness. I'm finding shiny spots where the guitar is actually living in the midst of their absence. That's in the studio portion of the record. As for the live tracks, they're full-on thrash-out stuff."

Texas blues-based rock was still a novel concept in 1970 when *ZZ Top's First Album* came out. But the band dug out a niche for itself through a series of hard-grinding albums and relentless touring. The thing broke through to a whole new level with 1975's World Wide Texas Tour. That outing found Messrs. Gibbons, Beard and Hill performing onstage with an entire menagerie: buffalo, cattle, rattlesnakes, buzzards and other creatures native to the Lone Star State. It set ZZ Top miles apart from what by that point had become a glut of "southern boogie" bands.



Backstage in 1997

Rock on the Range, at Crew Stadium, Columbus, Ohio, May 19, 2007

Rock and roll theme tours were still in their infancy. This one gave ZZ Top an ironic edge that reached out beyond their core rebel-yell audience. Was it a joke? The music certainly wasn't.

A few years later, during the band's extended 1977–79 hiatus, Gibbons and Hill both grew beards. Billy quickly turned this chance coincidence into another high-concept/low-comedy visual statement. Beards in place, the band the world now thinks of as ZZ top stepped forward in '79 with an album called *Deguello*, recorded for their new record label, Warner Bros. Although the music was still deeply rooted in blues tradition, the visual presentation had more in common with what was being done by another bunch of art students, some guys named Devo, and the new wave of rock groups to which they belonged. ZZ Top's lyrics also began taking on a kind of ironic undercurrent, as hinted by song titles like "Cheap Sunglasses" and "I'm Bad, I'm Nationwide."

The phrase, "I'm bad, I'm nationwide," Gibbons discloses, was co-originated by "Billy Lee Clayton, an old buddy of ours. He and I stumbled out of the Vulcan Gas Company, a nightclub in Austin. We'd just seen Freddie King. And we were searching for a phrase that would sum it up. He said, 'Man he's bad.' And I said, 'Yeah, he's nationwide.' The actual lyrics were devoted to another dear friend, Joey Long. He was this six-foot-tall, white Cajun guy who looked like Wolfman and played the meanest swamp guitar ever. He had a lovely wife named Barbarella, who drove their series of Cadillacs. He didn't even have a driver's license. But that made it all the more beautiful. He was definitely bad, and nationwide."

The advent of MTV in 1980 was like a dream come true for Billy, a brand-new vehicle for developing the visual/conceptual side of ZZ Top. "There's something real valuable in what MTV managed to bring to moment-by-moment living," Billy muses, "if you so chose to enter the world of the surreal. Salvador Dali, Picasso and the rest of them were right when they said that some day art will not be inaccessible; art will be in our hands."

Aided by a string of memorable video clips and a new techno-enhanced sound, ZZ Top enjoyed its greatest commercial success ever with 1983's *Eliminator*, '85's *Afterburner* and singles like "Gimme All Your Lovin'," "Sharp Dressed Man" and "Legs." ZZ Top were *on* top, while southern blues–based contemporaries like Lynyrd Skynyrd or .38 Special were names you just didn't hear anymore. The Eighties were a great time for ZZ, but how does Billy rate the decade in general?

"I think I got it in perspective just a little while ago," he grins. "I was watching the video for Talking Heads' 'Burning Down the House.' You know the one where they're projecting this image of David Byrne's head on this highway with white lines going up the middle? Looking at it, I realized that all those white lines are going straight up his nose. That just about sums up the Eighties, don't you think?"

1:35 A.M., RESTAURANT FLORENT, MEAT PACKING DISTRICT

"Man, that's tight!" Billy is grooving to the techno futurist sounds of Photek blasting from the stereo system in this all-night boho hipster diner. An insomniac, round-the-clock kind of guy, Billy knows the all-night places in many of the world's great cities. He comes to this far west downtown Manhattan spot for the music as much as the food. He soon has a decidedly post-modern-looking waitress up on a chair, retrieving the CD that's been playing so she can write down the track names for Billy. It's no secret that ZZ Top's guitarist is an avid fan of electronic and dance music. No one delights in the seeming incongruity of this more than Billy himself. With considerable relish, Billy tells the story of how he got into a recent sold-out Chemical Brothers show just because the guy at the door couldn't believe that someone in ZZ Top would even want to go near a Chemical Brothers gig.

"You mean *you're* into *this*?" said the astonished doorkeeper, eying Billy's long beard. "This I gotta see. Come on in."

Gibbons and ZZ Top have long had a great knack for incorporating contemporary rhythms and sounds into their classic blues-based approach. They used heavily sequenced Eighties machine rhythms on *Eliminator* and *Afterburner* as deftly as they fold drum-and-bass beats into *XXX*'s "Dreadmonboogaloo." Another track, "Crufcifixx-a-Flatt," crosses boldly onto hip-hop's rhythmic turf.

"The studio sessions for *XXX* unfolded at Foam Box Recording, our private room in Houston, Texas," Billy relates. "And we're right next door to the famous rap studio, John Moran's House of Funk. He does Scarface, the Geto Boys, Destiny's Child, Cash Money...all these great things that are having such a

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tremendous impact in Houston. So we started hanging out over there. In fact, we wound up mixing our tracks at the House of Funk. During that, we were still finding time to go back in our studio and cut new tracks. So we couldn't help but be influenced by our socializing with the rappers. They were so gracious in doing that streetwise thing with ZZ. And we were willing students."

XXX, Billy continues, "is the result of almost a full year doing the daily studio grind out at Foam Box. There were hours and hours of jam sessions. And the best of that was taken and reassembled using Pro Tools. ZZ Top have, in my humble opinion, one great true trio record: our last album, *Rhythmeen*, which had very few overdubs or punch-ins. That's about as straight ahead as it gets. But on this new record, we have made great strides and taken great liberties with some wonderful drum loops and some great textural background-y things. And its all aimed at giving the guitar player a nice heavy platform to feel solid with. When you get that much to stand on, brother, it's pedal to the metal. I mean *stand* on it."

With all that digital cutting and pasting, there are moments when *XXX* takes on a kind of Tom Waits scrapyard sensibility. "Tom Waits is one of my all-time heroes," Billy confirms. "We learned a long time ago that we were better off attempting to emulate Howlin' Wolf than pretending to be the next Bob Dylan. Yet there are just some charming dramatics in a handful of really visual lyricists like Waits, and that gets us aimed in the right direction, lyrically. Some of it is nothing more than backroom poetry. 'Crucifixx-A-Flatt' is our religion-meets-automotive-safety song but attempted from that Tom Waits' point of view. Like, you know what a crucifix is, and most people know what a can of Fixx-a-Flatt is, but Crucifix-A-Flatt is that gift from God at those times when life hands you nothing but a lonely road and a flat tire. It's that safety factor."

Other songs on *XXX* are more straightforward, like the album's first single, "Fearless Boogie." "It's our best work drawn from that Jimmy Reed tradition," Billy says. "That little Eddie Taylor [*American blues guitarist/singer and friend of Jimmy Reed*] hammer-on note is more than an afterthought; it was directed to be just that. It brings into focus the fact that ZZ Top still manage to hold onto that barroom tradition from whence the band originated. It's a legitimizing factor that balances out some of the craziness on the rest of the album."

Another key influence on *XXX* was Jeff Beck. ZZ Top caught one of Beck's shows at New York's Roseland. Afterward, they went backstage. "Jeff's new thing is champagne only backstage," Billy says. "No beer. No water. Nothing but champagne. Everyone was in a great mood. It was very lively back stage. But suddenly a sort of lull fell over the room. In the awkward silence I suddenly found myself blurting out, 'Hey Jeff, wanna play on our new album?' No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I became painfully aware of what a dumb remark that was. Beck doesn't play on anybody's album. Not Michael Jackson. Not Prince. Nobody. So to try and save the situation, I said to Jeff, 'But I don't want you to play guitar. I want you to sing.' Beck says 'Brilliant!' I don't know if he was being gracious and rescuing me from my *faux pas* or if he really meant it. Jeff hasn't really sung all that much on record. But the next day his manager said to me, 'He's really serious about this.' "

So Beck wound up overdubbing backing vocals onto the live track, "Hey Mr. Millionaire." "I went up to Jeff's hotel room with a Sony MiniDisc recorder and one of those little stereo microphones that go with it," Billy continues. "And we recorded the vocal right there in the hotel room. The engineer for our album had told me, 'Just get something on tape and we can insert it using Pro Tools. We can pitch-correct it and time-stretch it if we need to.' So I just had to get him to sing his vocal part in the hotel room. 'You know how much trust this entails?' Jeff said to me. 'Because I can't actually sing, you know.' "

Beyond this vocal performance, Jeff Beck's influence can be felt on some of Billy's guitar playing for *XXX* as well. There's a whiff of Beckism in his phrasing, note bends and use of echo.

"Of course, " Billy concedes. "Beck twisted our minds at that show. He just takes it in his stride and moves onto the next gig, no big deal, while everybody else is still scraping themselves off the floor saying, 'Wow, man, that was tough stuff!' So we raced out to get the new Jeff Beck album. And it did influence us quite a bit."

> "You know what a crucifix is, and most people know what a can of Fixx-a-Flatt is, but Crucifix-A-Flatt is that gift from God at those times when life hands you nothing but a lonely road and a flat tire."
> —*Gibbons*

2:15 A.M., RESTAURANT FLORENT

"Let's see, give me four of the vegetarian chilis, six of the mushroom salads..." Now Billy's ordering some food to go. It's another one of his peculiarities. He likes to order up tons of food. Around him, there are often numerous people rushing off in different directions to fulfill detailed sets of instructions—culinary and otherwise—issued by Billy. Somewhat sheepishly, he tells me how he once commandeered cartons of comestibles at the airport. He knew the food on the plane would be wretched. But once he got onboard, he fell asleep, not eating a thing.

To tell the truth, Billy is something of a pack rat. A hoarder. When he leaves a restaurant or club, he'll invariably line his pockets with matchbooks, postcards, anything that's there for the taking. He carries a miniature camera with him to capture scenes that seem important to him at the moment. It could be the inside of a store. Or a street corner. Just about anything. Back in Texas there are said to be eight warehouses filled with ZZ Top memorabilia: stage clothing, props, equipment...

2:30 A.M., GEM SPA, ST. MARK'S PLACE, EAST VILLAGE

Apparently, Billy's hoarding instinct extends to information as well as material objects. Here he is at one of New York's best-stocked newsstands buying a dozen hot-rod magazines and a few surf mags, having decided that he's already read all the pertinent music magazines on display. If nothing else, all this voracious reading makes Billy a great conversationalist. Architecture, macrobiotics, obscure blues recordings, automobiles, the design and manufacture of sunglasses... Bring up a subject and he's just about certain to be in possession of the relevant facts, figures and a handful of original opinions.

3:35 A.M., RIHGA ROYAL HOTEL

The evening winds down where it began, at the bar in Billy's hotel, which is now deserted. As often happens at this time of the morning, the conversation turns to stupid stuff like, will there be blues in the 21st century?

"Of course," says Billy, whose devotion to the genre is profound.

And does he have a disaster plan in the event that, as predicted, a computer bug shuts down power grids around the world at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve 2000?

"Well, we have purchased some Baygen radios," he replies, referring to the handcranked transistorized devices. "They have a rechargeable battery that can provide about a half hour before it needs to be recharged again. The fancier models have a light as well, which means you can have half an hour of light and, during that time, listen to your favorite music. So that, while we might experience a blackout in the new century, we can still have the blues."

LIQUOR IN THE FRONT POKER IN THE REAR

With *Mescalero*, their first album after a five-year absence, ZZ Top proved that the bawdy bad boys of boogie rock could still raise hell with the best of 'em. **By Dan Epstein**

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IT'S A GRAY MARCH afternoon in Houston, Texas. Outside, the rain is coming down in chilly torrents, but inside a hotel suite near the city's Galleria shopping center, hometown heroes ZZ Top are basking warmly in the toasty glare of a TV crew's lighting rig. Scheduled to play Rodeo Houston tomorrow night, drummer Frank Beard, bassist Dusty Hill and guitarist Billy F. Gibbons have assembled to good-naturedly answer a few questions about the a three-week rodeo/music event for the local news media. "You've gotta put on a good show in your hometown," Dusty says. "Otherwise, you hear about it the next day at the gas station!" When the interviewer asks them the secret of their success, Gibbons doesn't miss a beat. "Tone, taste and tenacity," he rumbles from behind his omnipresent beard and shades.

Go ahead—name another rock band that's stayed together without a single lineup change for as long as ZZ Top. You can't; even U2, who are generally viewed as the model of long-term band unity, first took the stage almost eight years after Billy, Dusty and Frank's inaugural jam at a 1969 Halloween party. Put it down to tone, taste, tenacity or anything else you like, but ever since that day, the self-styled "Little Ol' Band from Texas" has consistently offered up a deliciously twisted, gloriously distorted spin on Lone Star State blues. They've incorporated various technological advances along the way, yet they've typically ignored the prevailing fads and trends of the moment.

Mescalero (RCA), ZZ Top's sprawling 16-track album from 2003, adds its own unusual chapter to the ongoing sonic saga. Produced by Billy F. Gibbons at his Foam Box Recordings studio in Houston, the album has a little bit of something for every ZZ Top fan, whether they met the band on 1973's *Tres Hombres*, 1983's *Eliminator* or 1999's *XXX*. "It has some early style, some middle style and then some *wild* style," Billy says with a smile. You want some old-school roadhouse crunch? Dig the low-down boogie of "Liquor," the raunchy "Buck Nekkid" or the greasy cover of Lowell Fulson's "Tramp." Need a little blues to go with that heartbreak? Try the tear-jerking lament "Goin' So Good." Have a taste for some futuristic, industrial-flavored beats? Help yourself to the goofy "Me So Stupid" or the driving instrumental "Crunchy." And then there's tracks like "Mescalero," "Two Ways to Play," "Punk Ass Boyfriend" and "Piece," on which ZZ Top sound both more nastily fuzzed-out and more electronically hot-rodded than ever. In fact, if pressed for some sort of shorthand to sum it all up, you could do far worse than to describe *Mescalero* as " 'Tush' Goes Techno."

"Hey, not bad! Can we use that?" Billy says, as he and Dusty sit down with *Guitar World* to discuss the record. According to the guitarist, the album's genesis began with one of the band's previous European tours, where the boys were subjected to a steady stream of electronic sounds in the local clubs and watering holes. "Techno is rockin' over there," he says. "They do it in a different kind of way than what we might consider it from stateside. It's a little more heavy. And Dusty's kind of pushed me off in a direction. He said, 'Put this into your brain. Think early-style ZZ with the European thang.' "

" 'Techno' is a word almost like 'disco,' " Dusty adds. "It's got a bad connotation to it—you know what I mean? But there's cool techno, stuff that has more of an element of rock and roll to it. Plus, when we put our hands on it, it gets dirty. Which, you know, is good, as far as we're concerned."

Dirty sounds certainly do abound on *Mescalero*, thanks in part to an odd German guitar called the Teuffel Birdfish. A lightweight aluminum instrument with no headstock, three moon-shaped humbucking pickups and interchangeable "tone bars"—resonators—the Birdfish looks more like a work of postmodern sculpture than a functional ax.

"This eccentric German guy makes them in some hidden-away barn in the dark part of the Black Forest," Billy explains. "But there was a Teuffel rep based in Orange County, California, and he knew that ZZ Top—both Dusty and I—had an affinity for the odd and unusual. And I'm thinkin', Well, I've heard that before... But he was like, [*in Texas approximation of German accent*] 'Oh, Billy, let me zend you zomething!' Well, we opened the box, and I said, 'What is *this*? Whatever it is, I like it!'

"Dusty and I experimented with them, just out of curiosity. But they had our kind of sound right out of the box. And we used them on four tracks—'Mescalero,' 'Two Ways to Play,' 'Buck Nekkid' and 'Piece.' They're quite comfortable, they stay in tune great. It's adjustable in every way that you'd want: the pickups go up and down, they go forward and back, and you can set your pickup position to the 16th of an inch. It really shines on 'Mescalero' because of that dirty, raunchy tone. I defy any other instrument to get *that* crazy. It would take a line of 50 Fuzz-Tones!"

Of course, it wouldn't be a ZZ Top album without the presence of Pearly Gates, Billy's legendary '59 Les Paul. "Pearly's on just about everything on *Mescalero*," Billy says. "Pearly Gates is the cornerstone of sound, and from all that, others will be judged. I also used an old Gretsch that Bo Diddley gave me, and a '51 black pickguard Esquire that I think I used on 'Tramp.' It was tuned down to low B, which almost rendered it unusable, but it lended that *heaviness* to it. It's a strange sound—strange in a good way, I suppose!"

For a band so steeped in blues history and lore, ZZ Top have surprisingly few covers of classic blues numbers in their discography. But the lure of "Tramp," originally recorded in 1966 by Lowell Fulson—and later covered by numerous artists, most famously as a duet by Otis Redding and Carla Thomas—simply could not be denied.

"I heard it on the radio in Los Angeles during one of the Sunday afternoon blues hours," Billy explains, "and I couldn't forget it. It just stuck and stuck and stuck." After kicking it around a few times during prerecording jams, the band decided to try tracking it. "It just became so much fun to play, we thought, Hey, let's give this a run!" Dusty says. "Through the years, we haven't

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done a lot of other people's stuff, but occasionally we'll do something. And with Billy's voice, it just seemed right."

Adds Billy, "Lowell Fulson was so great, but somewhat underrated in the grand scheme of who gets mentioned first. You've got Howlin' Wolf, B.B. King, Jimmy Reed, T-Bone Walker, Freddie King, Albert King. But where's Lowell? He was a talent; he could deliver. His records on Kent have a beautiful, warm sound. 'Black Nights'? That's some great, great stuff."

In addition to his Tueffel Birdfish bass (allegedly the only one in existence), Dusty used his trusty early Fifties Fender Telecaster bass on the album, along with an off-the-rack Sixties Jazz Bass reissue. "Dusty's the only bassist I know that's got a built-in Fuzz-Tone in his finger," Billy says, then laughs as Dusty proudly displays his right index finger. Nicknamed "the Pleaser," the stubby digit hasn't bent in decades, the result of a football injury in his younger days. "Whatever I'm playing, once I put 'the Pleaser' on it, it seems to change the sound anyway," Dusty says with a shrug.

Dusty's studio rig, an old Ampeg SVT head with an 8x10 cabinet, made its presence felt during the *Mescalero* sessions in more ways than one.

"To get a little separation in the recording room, the speaker cabinets were crammed into the corner, turned in to the wall," Billy says. "Now, our next-door neighbor shares a common wall. Granted, it's a pretty significant firewall, but the way Dusty plays... Our neighbor is a photographer, and he basically does glamour work. One day he came over and said, 'So, what's up?' And I said, 'We're basically just reviewing the tracks, doing a little catch-up and housecleaning. Why do you ask?' And he said, 'Because I've got these great-lookin' girls comin' in, and they always work better when that 'boom' comes through the wall!' "

"It really shakes their tiara," Dusty says, grinning.

"I'm glad you said that," Billy says. laughing. "I was gonna say something else, but 'tiara' works."

HANG OUT IN HOUSTON with Billy F. Gibbons for any decent length of time and you'll come away with a sense of what it must be like to keep company with royalty. Everywhere Billy goes in H-Town, people call out his name, greeting him like an old friend. Middle-aged men come to his table, hands trembling, to shyly request an autograph; attractive ladies drape themselves around his lanky figure, playfully asking when he's going to marry them. Through it all, Billy remains remarkably gracious, never pulling a star trip or being anything less than accommodating. It's been said that no one in rock and roll truly enjoys his fame more than Billy F. Gibbons, and there's little in his manner that would appear to contradict such a statement.

There are, however, times when the patience of even the most stoic individual can be sorely tested. The night before ZZ Top's appearance at Rodeo Houston, *Guitar World*, Billy and a couple of his pals repair to a local cantina for a post-rehearsal round of beer, margaritas and chicken enchiladas. It's almost closing time, and the place is empty, save for a few customers and one exceedingly drunk mariachi, whose filmy eyes light up as soon as Billy walks through the door. Though the guitarist is too soused to play, let alone drive home, he insists on performing a number or two for Billy and his crew. Billy requests the traditional Mexican ballad "Volver, Volver," taking the high vocal harmony as the musician happily fumbles his way through the song.

When the performance concludes, Billy's cohorts offer polite applause, silently hoping that the mariachi will return to his barstool. Instead, fired up by the positive reception, the man begins to yammer excitedly in rapid-fire Spanish, oblivious to the fact that not even Billy, the one person at the table with decent *Español* skills, has any idea what he's talking about. Then, satisfied with his monologue, the guitarist breaks into a rendition of "Guantanamera" that can only be described as "grinding." As his audience looks on in wordless horror, a steady stream of drool begins to pour from the right corner of his mouth while he plays. The saliva waterfall first hits the body of the guitar, then splashes straight into the fresh basket of tortilla chips sitting on the table. "I think these oughta be hermetically sealed or something," Billy says,

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chuckling as he gingerly moves the chip basket to the next table, as the restaurant manager finally escorts the sodden guitarist back to the bar. "But what I really wanna know is, what kind of *tequila* was that cat drinkin'?"

For all his elemental sang-froid, you've gotta wonder sometimes if the guitarist's self-effacing sense of humor—his business card reads "Gibbons: Friend of Eric Clapton"—and eccentric personal style hasn't somehow kept Billy F. Gibbons from getting his total due as a musician. To much of the world, Billy is more of a cartoon character than a guitar hero, but his searing approach to electric blues is certainly as unique (and nearly as influential) as that of Clapton, Keith Richards or the late Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Mescalero represents yet another milestone in Billy's endless quest to refine his saturated, instantly recognizable tone. "I'm not above taking a moment to experiment with this and that," he says, rattling off a list of effects that includes Vari-Drive, Real Tube, Austone and Expandora distortion units, some ancient DeArmond tremolo pedals and "that Danelectro wah-wah that looks like a car—that's the craziest thing I've ever seen!" But for the most part, *Mescalero*'s sleazy, splooge-encrusted guitar tones are as much the product of a happy accident of physics as they are of well-chosen stomp boxes. Or maybe we'd better just get out of the way and let the man explain.

"I've got a nice little 2x10 Marshall that was put together by Brent Magnano's outfit, Guitar Oasis," Billy says. "For convenience, a 'Plexi' head was stuffed into an old mini-Marshall cabinet; there was just enough space to squeeze two 10-inch speakers into it. That's panned hard right on the recording, and then we're using the Marshall JMP-1 pre-amp—it's got a little 12AX7 tube in it—and that's direct-signaled to the left side, hard-panned left.

"While recording, we kept hearing what we thought was a delay, a little bit of slapback. But it wasn't *even*—some notes were closer together than other notes. And we looked and we searched; we chased all the signal lines down, and we didn't even have a delay in the line. What we suspect was occurring was a simple law of physics: the paper speakers were making their excursions outward and inward, while the JMP-1 was hardwired. Now, electrons travel much faster down the wire than this primitive method of sound reproduction; the paper was responding slower, but the high notes were close together, and the low notes got wider apart. So it's this organic delay effect. It weaves all over the place—it's *smeary*. We've noticed that it even changes from guitar to guitar, particularly Fenders. Because of their longer scale, they have a tighter, treblier sound, and of course it's reflected in the amplifier end of things. Man, just when you think you know it all, something jumps up to say, 'Nope, it's gonna change on ya!' "

According to Billy, humidity—something that Houston has no shortage of—also played its part in the recording. "The quality of the air surrounding a microphone can really affect the sound," he says. "You say, 'What's different today?' Well, it's 100 degrees and 80 percent humidity; the air is rich, and then if that changes, guess what? The response of that speaker and diaphragm of the microphone, it's all different, because the air between 'em is different. It's amazing. It can drive you crazy—*good* crazy.

"Maybe that's what contributes to the magic and the mystery that differentiates Texas tone from anyplace else. Particularly on the Gulf Coast—you get players from the Mexican border, all the way through Louisiana and Mississippi. You get in a hot rod and follow Interstate 10 until it ends over in Florida. As long as you stay south, it's gonna be fat and sassy."

IT'S NEARLY SHOWTIME at Houston's Reliant Stadium, an edifice so monumentally hulking, it positively dwarfs the neighboring Astrodome. This is the eighth night of this year's Rodeo Houston, but most of the 60,000-plus people in attendance seem as if they could care less about the evening's calf-ropin' and bronc-bustin' competitions. They're here to see ZZ Top, who are playing back in their hometown for the first time in 12 months.

After country artist Lee Greenwood gets the crowd pumped with a solo performance of his "God Bless the USA," set to a backdrop of Space Shuttle and U.S. Air Force footage, Billy and Dusty emerge onto the revolving stage in rhinestone-studded serapes and 10-gallon hats and promptly kick the shit out of a hit-packed 15-song set. Billy plays his Bo Diddley Gretsch for most of the evening, then whips out Pearly Gates for a couple of numbers—only it's not actually the fabled '59 Les Paul but rather a hollowed-out reissue model that, Billy proudly tells *Guitar World*, "weighs less than a Martin acoustic."

"We steamed off the top and went for it," he says. "I was like, 'I don't want a speck of sawdust that isn't necessary.' We did four of 'em—standard, right-off-the-rack Gibsons. There was one of the Gibson Les Paul reissues that was quite pricey, but I knew that we were taking a chance on totally trashing them anyway, so we bought the cheap ones."

In sound and attitude, ZZ Top still come off more like a garage band than a classic-rock institution. Not surprisingly, they've been heartened by the emergence of newer, rawer bands like the Hives, the Vines and the White Stripes. "What they're doing feels closer to the heart of how we started than anything else out there," says Dusty, who paid his garage-band dues with Frank Beard in the American Blues before they hooked up with Billy, who had been playing with the Moving Sidewalks. "Just bangin' for it and gettin' complaints from neighbors, you know? I mean, you've gotta get complaints from neighbors, or you ain't doin' it right."

"All of the 'the' bands, they're poignantly expending their personal energy toward 'getting it right,' " says Billy, nodding sagely. "What 'right' is, we don't know. But when you feel it, it's good. And these guys are doing it."

ZZ Top are doing it as well, and they'll probably continue to do so until the Grim Reaper pries their vintage axes from their cold, dead hands. "We're still the same three guys, playing the same three chords, enjoying it all," says Billy. "That's how we started. We've always said, 'Make it loud, and it'll be fine.' " And it always is.

LIFE ON ZZ STREET

Mellow down easy with nasty dog and funky king Billy F. Gibbons, the Houston kid who has seen his Li'l Ol' Band From Texas go from nationwide boogie boys to international ambassadors of blues rock. **By Bob Gulla**

BILLY F. GIBBONS IS looking into the camera. At least we think he's looking into the camera. It's impossible to tell because his eyes are blacked out by his signature "cheap" sunglasses (Ray-Bans, actually). In fact, his entire head is blacked out, sort of, what with the beard, the glasses, and an African skullcap that could almost pass for really weird hair. Even longtime fans would be hard-pressed to ID the man's naked visage. Still, sitting on a stool in front of his Crate V-50 combo, he looks and sounds like a pro as he shills for his new guitar.

"This Gretsch is a new model called the Billy-Bo," he begins. "It was inspired by Bo Diddley's guitar: perfectly balanced, one-piece body, nice backside contour. I highly recommend it. All you gotta do is spank the plank and tear it up."

Gibbons's new Billy-Bo is truly a gem. It retains the Diddley original's four-knob configuration, two Filtertron pickups, Space Control bridge, G tailpiece, three-position toggle switch, and string-through body construction. It's one sweet machine, one that Gibbons now tours with and beats on constantly—which is really saying something when you consider the heap of axes the guy owns. "Grab that slab, plug it in and grind me a pound," he insists. Gibbons has innumerable ways of telling his fans the same thing: pick up the guitar and play it.

The thing is, he means it. He's been a fanatic about the instrument since the late Fifties, when, as a kid in his native Houston, he saw Scotty Moore accompanying Elvis. Growing up in the early Sixties, he witnessed the surf scene; an image of the Fender Strat was thrust into his head. And as lead guitarists emerged in the Sixties, Gibbons was right there, zeroing in on a style of his own, patterned after Diddley, Chuck Berry, Buddy Guy, Steve Cropper and Jimmie Nolan. In the late Sixties, Gibbons befriended Jimi Hendrix, who helped him understand the potential of the instrument. Inspired at the same time by the explosive sound of Eric Clapton's Gibson SG and Marshall, Gibbons began cutting his own musical path, first as the founder of the marginally influential Texas psychedelic band the Moving Sidewalks, and then, later, after meeting bassist Dusty Hill and drumer Frank Beard, as frontman for ZZ Top.

Beneath the beard and dapper tux-like suit is a six-string madman, a greased-up blues-rock machine with the finesse of an expert, the revs of a muscle car, and the guitar vocabulary of a scholar. He's a psycho-hillbilly Longhorn in heavy camouflage, and over the past 30 years he's kicked up the most visceral blues we've heard from a commercial act. And while he may harbor much of his true personality under and within those grassy, foot-long strawberry strands of facial hair, there's no

ROSS HALFIN

hiding Gibbons' true and deep love for righteous blues-and-boogie guitar.

"There's nothing more enjoyable than pickin' up a geetar and bangin' it, findin' the best frets, findin' those sounds," he writes in his new book, *Billy F. Gibbons: Rock + Roll Gearhead*, a hardcover love letter to his two greatest passions: cars and guitars. "The bottom line is love what you do, chase what you wanna hear! I personally choose to use everything available as far as the hands go. And what goes on in my head—what goes on in my head can be quite overwhelming. Count on using everything you can! Get meaner, faster, quicker...." He closes the quote by paraphrasing Muddy Waters: "You don't have to be the best one, just be a good 'un."

Gibbons has abided by Waters' advice by becoming a superb stylist, a player who, like many of rock's greatest pickers, can be identified by a single plucked note or thundering chord. His tone and style benefit from his gear fanaticism. To wit, on his to-do list while in New York City, along with a ZZ Top gig and a few promo appearances for his book, was a trip down to Chelsea Guitars, a well-known guitar shop owned by Dan Courtenay that is home to a raft of rare guitars. The side jaunt was something of a pilgrimage for Gibbons, who wanted to see (and hold, and hear) an early Leo Fender Telecaster prototype known simply as "No. 0009."

Like *prima facie* evidence, ZZ Top's two recently reissued classics, *Tres Hombres* and *Fandango*—both of which were given the deluxe treatment by Warner Bros./Rhino—offer proof that Gibbons' guitar talents are on par with those of any well-noted blues-rock guitar god. You might call him the "other" guitar god. *Tres Hombres*, released in 1973, featured the bluesy single "La Grange" (based on John Lee Hooker's seminal "Boogie Chillen") and album tracks/live staples like "Beer Drinkers & Hell Raisers" and "Jesus Just Left Chicago." It was the work that herded the band out of Texas and into the national limelight. *Fandango*, a half-live, half-studio collection issued two years later, boasted a second hit single, the crowd-favorite "Tush," as well as "Heard It On the X" (which many consider to be the band's best work). This sound, this hoodoo boogie, sent not only ZZ Top stampeding across the country but also helped to establish blues-rock as a commercial form.

After Gibbons finishes stumping for his new guitar, he prepares to give a lesson. To facilitate this task, a *Guitar World* editor brings him a paper bag with a six-pack of Budweiser tall boys in it. We had heard Gibbons drinks beer through a straw, to keep the suds out of his beard, naturally; but at the moment he is sans straw. He digs out a can, yanks open the pop-top with a *tsssst!*, tips it back, then places it down.

"One good starting point for rockin' blues is Jimmy Reed," he says without hesitation. He quickly works up a blues shuffle. (**FIGURE 1**) "It doesn't get much simpler than this. Reed was accompanied by Eddie Taylor, who complemented that particular riff with this move [*a IV-I change with a ♭3rd-3rd grace slur*], and you could combine the two and play it like this [**FIGURE 2**]. And of course, the famous answer [*turnaround*], from the V back to the I, goes all the way back to Robert Johnson." (**FIGURE 3**)

Gibbons cranks out variations on the original Jimmy Reed riff with ease, blending and twisting each one together like colors on a barber's pole, adding increasing amounts of meat to what began as a bare-bones figure. Then Billy's cell phone rings. He stops for a moment, answers. "It's Jimmy Reed calling!" he says aloud gruffly, with a sly smile. Then, into the phone: "What was that? Turn around at the five? OK."

At last, Gibbons takes the call, but not before telling everyone in the studio "I'll be right back to ya!" Within a few minutes he does indeed return, and we resume our interview.

GUITAR WORLD What inspired you to put this book together?

BILLY GIBBONS It's no secret that this astounding number of cars and guitars has escalated to the point where it's worthy of publishing a book of them. We started digging back through the vault—it's always fun to go find that guitar that may have been overlooked but has gotten some significance along the way. So there was an excursion into that realm of pulling out things that had a keen sense of importance, both cars and guitars. Cars and guitars are much like babies: they like a lot of attention and a lot of liquids.

It's important to note that there's a synergistic connectivity between cars and guitars. On the gear level, you get a guitar, learn a song, and then you have to take it to the nightclub. But to get to the club you have to have a car, so why not do it in style? That's the backbone of how all of this beloved accumulation came to being.

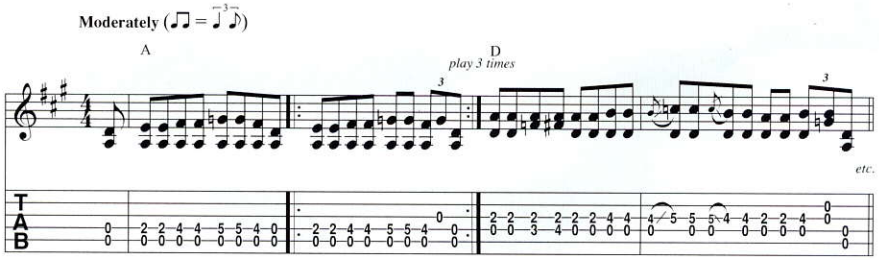
GW And your story in guitars alone is an interesting one.

GIBBONS The cornerstone is the first guitar that founded the sound of Billy F. Gibbons and ZZ Top, which is the 1959 Sunburst Gibson Les Paul "Pearly Gates." And from that rather unexpected beginning, the chase to find a guitar that would perform in the same manner, volume-wise, frequency-wise and harmonic-wise, continued to be evasive. It was an elusive specialty that this one guitar had, and along the way we've discovered that each guitar has its own character and personality, which can be magnified once the player engages in beatin' it up.

GW Like perfume on a woman, right?

GIBBONS Yes, it's very personal. In fact, even two guitars manufactured on the same day are different: board by board, plank by plank, the glue they use, the temperature, the amount of paint—all these elements add to this flavor. With respect to the diversity of

FIGURE 1



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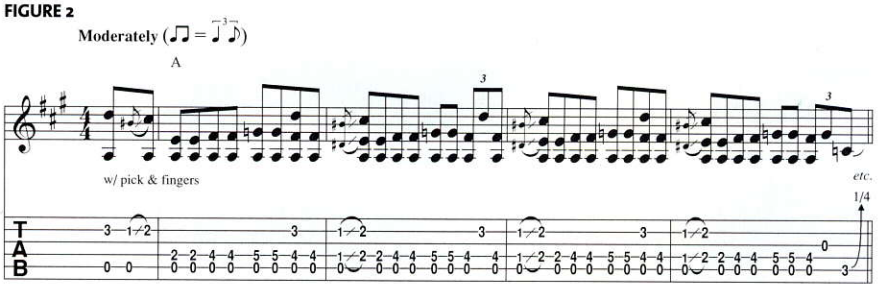
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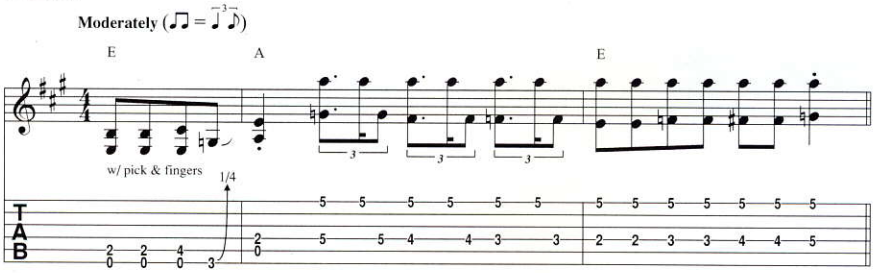


the guitar, the interest factor goes through the roof with that one notion of personality and character, piece by piece, performance by performance. For me, it's a seemingly endless well of interest. Certain guitars just affect one's playing, whether it's his technique or his sound. And I have on many occasions shared moments of guitar-playing mysteries—like, Man, I played this exactly the same way, but I just happened to play it on a different instrument and it came out totally different; it wasn't even the same riff. But the point is to have a good time with it.

GW How much consideration do you give to style, as a player, a person and a gear guy?

GIBBONS Style is paramount. We are now living in a world that is divided into a gazillion segments, each requiring a bit of attention to maintain a level of patience that allows one to develop something that could be recognized as a signature or style. It motivates us to capture our own moments in a world that is continually being divided; it's the challenge of every player. There was a time when there weren't as many styles to consider. But the good news is that we're experiencing an escalating range of creativity. On one hand it's more difficult to find something that will hold your attention. On the other hand, in the words of Salvador Dali, "at some point in the not-so-distant future, the world will become surreal." And I think, guitarwise, we're there now.

GW Tell us about the joys and challenges of sitting in with someone like Les Paul, or B.B. King. What do you bring to those situations?

GIBBONS Stepping outside of the private club called ZZ Top, I've accepted some fascinating invitations from groups as diverse as Queens of the Stone Age and Nickelback, and also to Les Paul's 90th birthday tribute, and B.B.'s 80th. These are all different projects, and they require different approaches. With Queens of the Stone Age, they're a real focused unit, a bit eccentric, but focused in a way that made it real easy to come in, and plug in and play. There are always certain challenges that I don't anticipate.

GW Let's talk about what's in store for you as a player, and for ZZ Top in general.

GIBBONS It's entered into this realm of mind reading. ZZ Top is what we enjoy most. Playing in ZZ Top, playing with the Rolling Stones—there's an enjoyable sidelight. Why do we do it? We love doing it. It's all we know, and all we know how to do. Once you get stung by it, it stays with you, and that's certainly the case with us. We're also entertained by the fact that we're excited about new gear. You can play three chords as long as you want, so long as some pedal or some attachment, some signal-path-modification unit, comes along to keep it fresh. It becomes a rather interesting excursion, twisting and turning and changing that which *was* into that which could be.

GW You and the band have been so consistent with your style. Do you ever have the desire to try something different?

GIBBONS The desire remains. But as tireless tourers, we don't have time for it. Sure, you can check in with your pals, check in with the newsstand—that all plays a part in that element of freshness. You don't have to abandon history, but it's a goal of ours to stay one foot in the blues and keep one eye on the horizon.

GW Tell me about the current creative trajectory of the band?

GIBBONS The new direction for ZZ Top is not so new. We're supported by our engineers, Joe Hardy and G.L. Moon, who remain in-house and hands-on, and with a few select words their assistance brings special skills to the party—they keep even the most far-fetched, far-out ideas grounded. There are three musicians that get in the box and thrash it out, and with the help of a tremendous staff we've become a well-oiled machine. The band joke, of course, is that we all want to play solo albums—but we'd all have to have this same band play on 'em, because we like the way it works so much!

There must be something you see on the horizon that tells you it's worth it to continue on with the band, and to continue playing this style of guitar. Indeed. For every guy that says things are going south, there are two that are convinced it's going in the other direction. My discussion with Keith Richards about the creative process led me to believe that there's an invisible presence of a stream of ever-flowing creativity that we overhear—all you have to do is pull up the antenna and dial it in. This presence allows you to maintain your sense of origin and move forward. You can't stop it. The radio is playing in my head all day long.

GW What are your playing habits, and what are you working on right now?

GIBBONS Our playing habits are never-ending; it's an ongoing process of experimentation. We've reached a very sophisticated level of tonal tweaking. That doesn't mean that it's over. It just means that there's nothing left but the next thing.

GW ZZ Top cut a lot of its early recordings at Robin Hood Studios. What do you recall about the studio, and what was it like recording there?

GIBBONS That was 30 years ago, and the equipment available at that time was all that great tube gear—Neumann and Telefunken mics and Fairchild and Pultec compressors and equalizers. The room wasn't anything to brag about—just a square box, really—but we all got to play together.

GW What guitars and amps were you using back then?

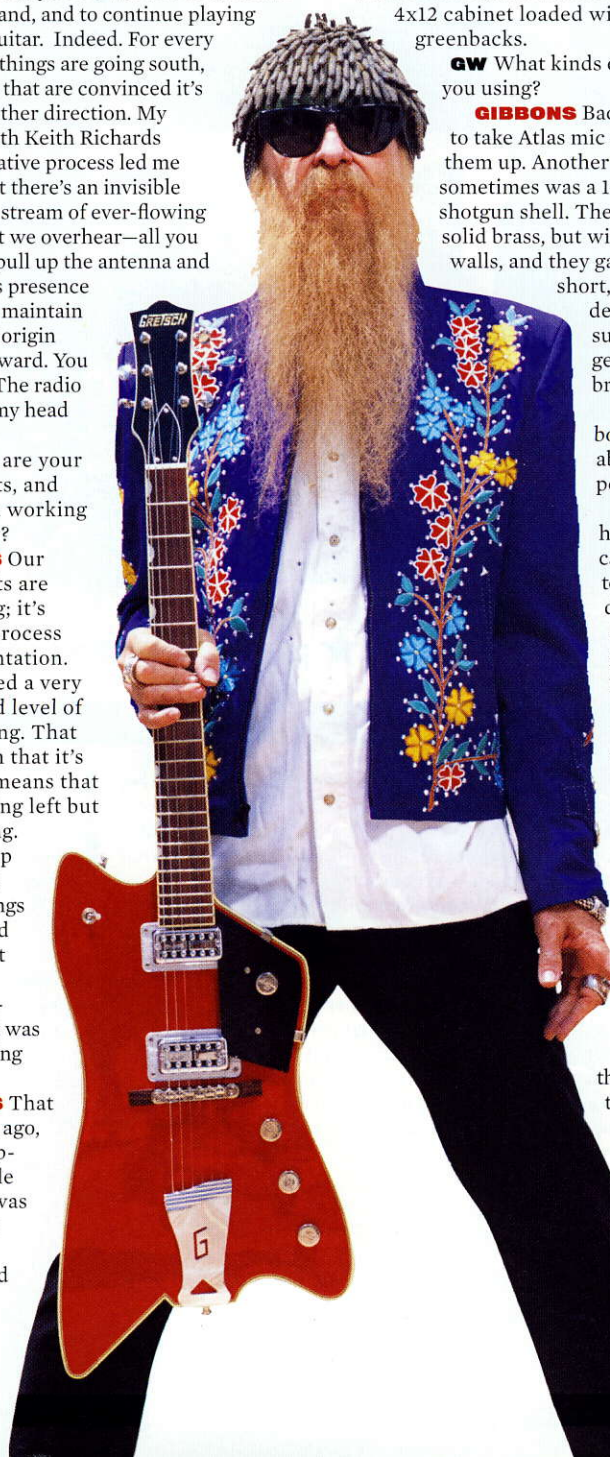
GIBBONS Just my Gibson Les Paul and a '54 Hardtail Fender Strat—an old maple-neck thing that I still have kicking around somewhere. I recall using that Strat on "Blue Jean Blues," and I had it going both through the amp and direct into the board. You'll notice it's a very clean sound on that song. We were actually just warming up, and the engineer said, "Gee, this is different, why don't we explore that tone a little bit?" My amp at the time was a 1969 100-watt Marshall. It wasn't a plexi; it had a gold-anodized face, and I ran it into a 4x12 cabinet loaded with Celestion greenbacks.

GW What kinds of slides were you using?

GIBBONS Back then, I used to take Atlas mic stands and chop them up. Another thing I'd use sometimes was a 10-gauge metal shotgun shell. They were made of solid brass, but with really thin walls, and they gave a sort of short, staccato-like delivery, with less sustain than you get from a thicker brass slide.

GW Can you boast a little bit about your high points?

GIBBONS A high point in my career would have to be discovering the liberation the guitar affords, the total abandonment of playing. That is, you need to maintain a sense of integrity but really let it go. And in so doing you encounter things that were not predictable. The unpredictable nature of things takes you to the next step up. If you make a few mistakes, let it go. It's part of the program. You've got to expect that.



ROSS HALFIN

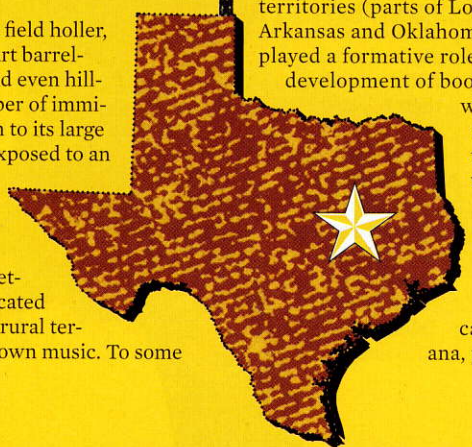
THE HISTORY OF TEXAS BLUES

By Robert Palmer ★ Reprinted from GUITAR WORLD, September 1996

Leadbelly performing at the Stuyvesant Casino, New York City, June 1946

NO MATTER WHAT you may have heard or read, nobody knows where the blues began—or even if it *did* begin in a particular place, as opposed to springing up in several places more or less simultaneously. The Mississippi Delta is often credited with being the "cradle of the blues," but there is evidence that the music was flourishing in Texas at least as early as it was in Mississippi. When asked for his opinion, pioneering blues and folk scholar Alan Lomax used to quote a traditional, anonymous lyric he had encountered early in his travels: "The blues came from Texas, loping like a mule."

Blues is by nature something of a gumbo: part field holler, part guitar ragtime and songster balladry, and part barrelhouse boogie, with a seasoning of gospel, jazz and even hillbilly music. In Texas, a big, big state with a number of immigrant communities and small farmers in addition to its large cotton plantations, early blues musicians were exposed to an unusually broad range of influences: mariachi bands and flamenco-inspired guitarists from Mexico; French-speaking Cajun and Zydeco bands; the polkas and other accordion-driven dance music of German and Eastern European settlers; and a widespread jazz scene, with sophisticated music heard not only in the cities but also in the rural territories, where it took the form of old-time hoedown music. To some degree, Texas blues absorbed all these influences, and the blues was itself a prime ingredient in later Texas styles such as Western swing, honky-tonk and rockabilly.

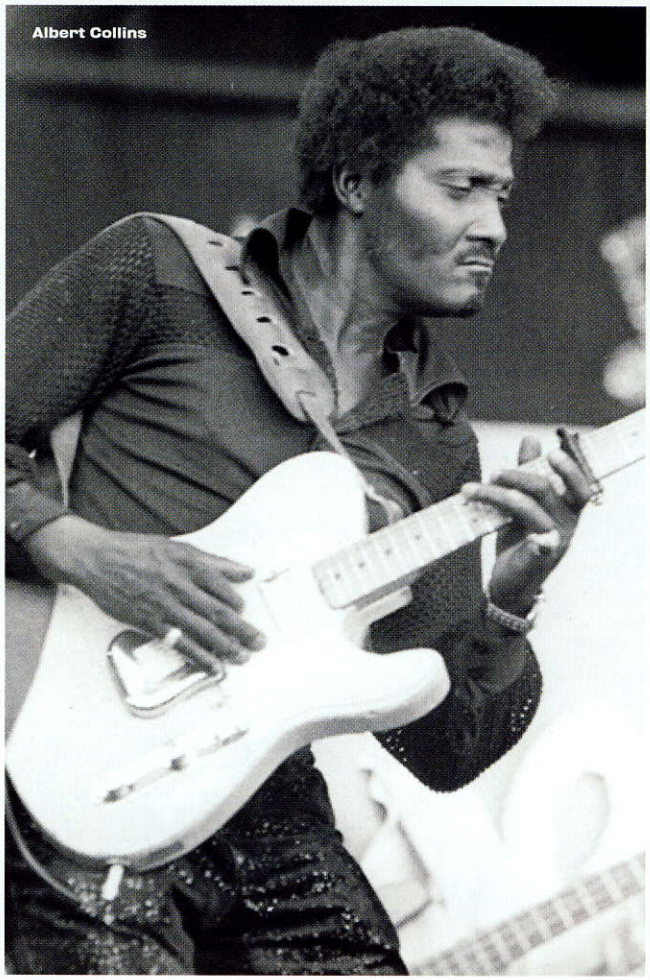


Texas' blues pedigree is unsurpassed, and the Lone Star State, along with its bordering territories (parts of Louisiana, Arkansas and Oklahoma), played a formative role in the development of boogie-woogie, the pounding, rocking eight-to-the-bar rhythmic foundation for all subsequent developments in rock and roll. The origins of boogie are generally attributed to anonymous black pianists who entertained workers in the isolated, backwoods lumber and turpentine camps of eastern Texas and western Louisiana, probably around the turn of the century.

THIS PAGE: WILLIAM GOTTLIEB / RETNA LTD.; OPPOSITE PAGE: JAN PERSSON / REDFERNS / RETNA LTD.

T-Bone Walker performing in 1972

A traveling pianist and songwriter from New Orleans, Clarence Williams, reported hearing a Texas pianist playing boogie-woogie bass figures in Houston in 1911, more than 15 years before the first boogie-woogie recordings. (The Texas pianist George Thomas was the patriarch of a piano-playing family that included early recording artists Hociel and Hersal Thomas and their sister, better known as the classic blues singer—and Bonnie Raitt idol—Sippie Wallace. In 1917 or 1918, another pianist, Sammy Price, heard blues guitarist Blind Lemon Jefferson playing bass-string boogie riffs. The term Jefferson knew, however, was "booger rooger," which was something like an all-weekend house party, what East Texas Cajuns called a "la la." You can hear Jefferson's jamming, loose-limbed approach to the "booger-rooger" rhythm in the final choruses of "Easy Rider Blues," his version of the pre–World War I Texas standard. As with so much of American music's history, nobody knows for sure whether boogie-woogie was invented by pianists and later adapted to the guitar, or the other way around. However it went down, it probably went down in Texas.


Albert Collins

THE FIRST GUITARISTS

Guitars seem to have found their way into the hands of black musicians in Texas earlier than in other parts of the South. The long border the state shares with Mexico meant there was widespread contact with Spanish-speaking immigrants, whose culture has cherished the guitar since the Moors brought prototypes to Spain in the Middle Ages. Centuries later, back in Texas, the first wave of black guitarists we know about had already developed their own style and repertoire well before the initial wave of popularity for the blues. Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, roamed the countryside playing a rolling bass-heavy style of 12-string guitar (then a novel Mexican import) and singing narrative ballads, hoedown tunes and other dance music that predated the blues. "Texas" Henry Thomas was a hobo who ferociously strummed his guitar while blowing on a set of cane panpipes that was rack-mounted around his neck, like a harmonica.

Thomas left an impressive body of recordings, including "Bull Doze Blues," from which Canned Heat derived their 1969 hit "Going Up the Country." Of all the Texas songsters (archetypal wandering bluesmen except that they performed more ballads, breakdowns and ragtime than blues), Mance Lipscomb was one of the longest lived and best loved. Unlike Leadbelly and Thomas, he generally stayed in one spot and farmed rather than brave the juke joints and barrelhouses, where murder and mayhem could be counted on to spice up most any Saturday night.

During the first few decades of the 20th century, blues slowly eclipsed the old songster ballads and hoedown tunes as the rural dance and entertainment music of choice. In most of the South, there were considerable social as well as musical barriers separating blues musicians from those who played jazz or sang gospel. Blues was "country," associated with the "down and out"; jazz musicians considered it musically moronic, and pious churchgoers deemed it the devil's music.

Texas, once again, did things differently. From the beginning, Texas blues and jazz enjoyed a fruitful relationship, one that worked to the advantage of both. Even the most unreconstructed, musically primitive bluesmen, such as the influential singer Texas Alexander, often recorded with a sympathetic jazz player or two as featured soloists. The jazz musicians, for their part, didn't share their peers' disdain for the blues; in fact, jazz bands from Texas and Oklahoma largely built their reputation playing loosely arranged, rhythmically compelling jump blues. This was as true of the Blue Devils, Twenties precursors of the original Count Basie band, as it was 20 years later, when Houston's Milt Larkin Orchestra introduced a whole new generation of honking, big-toned Texas saxophonists—bluesmen all.

BLIND LEMON JEFFERSON

But when it comes to blues, Blind Lemon Jefferson was the most influential artist Texas produced until the post–World War II arrival of seminal electric guitarist T-Bone Walker.

As early as 1915, Jefferson was known around Dallas and in the surrounding countryside as an itinerant street singer. Beginning in 1926, he enjoyed a string of hit records that continued, off and on, until his death in 1929. Nowadays, Charley Patton, Robert Johnson and other Mississippi Delta bluesmen are the best remembered of Lemon's near contemporaries, but he was arguably a more significant blues artist than any of them. According to blues historian Steve Calt, a Patton champion and biographer, Blind Lemon Jefferson was "as important within the scheme of blues as Elvis Presley is to rock" and "the most famous males blues singer who ever lived, rivaling Bessie Smith for popularity among record buyers of his time."

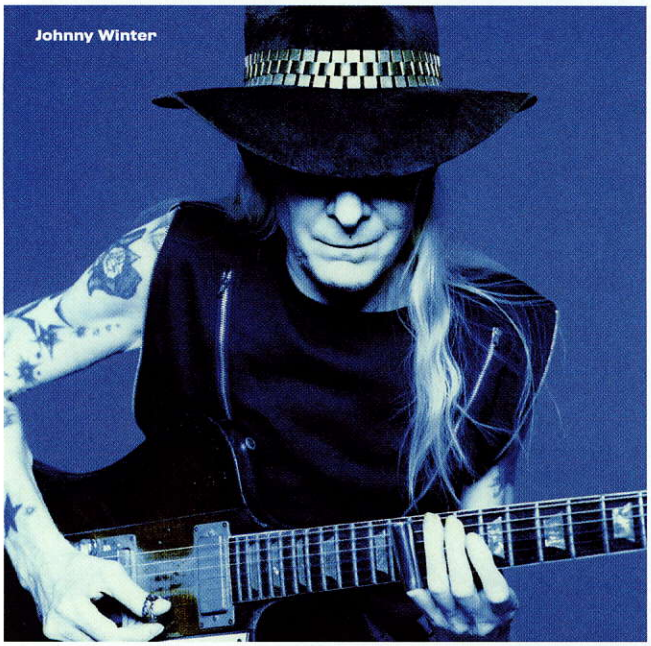
Many rural bluesmen habitually drop a beat or a bar from, or add a half bar or more to, the standard 12-bar verse, resulting in actual verse lengths ranging from 11 to 13 and a half bars, often in the same tune. On first impression, Jefferson's playing was even more anarchic that that: while singing, he would strum quiet chords or softly mark the beat, but his guitar fills, generally tumbling, single-note lines inserted between vocal verses, were liable to meander almost anywhere. Calt describes these fills as "impromptu-sounding riffs of no fixed order or duration." This edge-of-your-seat approach to improvisation is what makes Jefferson classics like "Match Box Blues," "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" and "That Black Snake Moan" perennially rewarding and surprising.

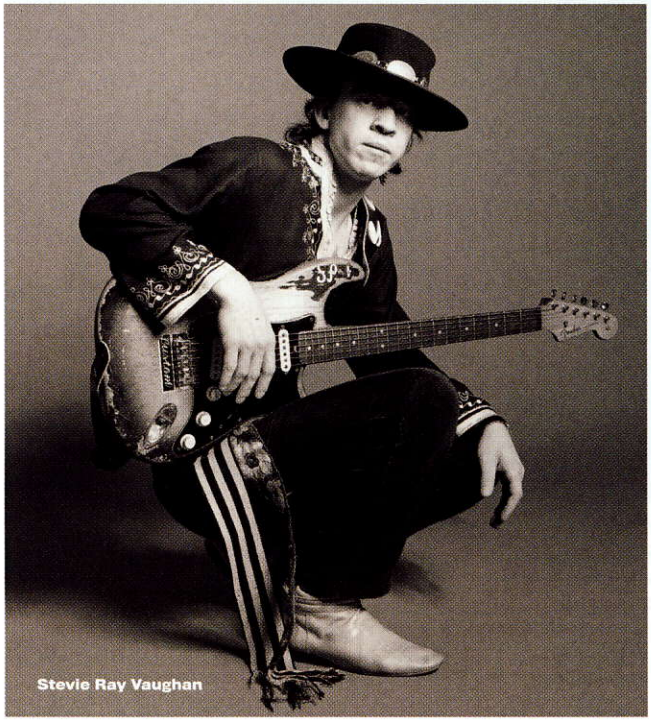
In effect, Jefferson developed and popularized "lead guitar" as a style of blues accompaniment. T-Bone Walker, who listened to Jefferson and followed him around Dallas as a youth, later amplified the single-note lead lines he'd inherited. Walker's combination of melodic invention, bluesy string bending and jazz-flavored chord voicings inspired virtually every blues-based guitarist who's come along since, including Delta-bred stylists as influential in their own right as B.B. King and Robert Jr. Lockwood.

ELECTRIC TEXAS

Texas musicians took to the electric guitar as rapidly and enthusiastically as they had taken up the guitar itself at the beginning of the century. Eddie Durham, a guitarist from San Marcos, Texas, made his first "amplified" guitar in the early Thirties, using a tin pan as a resonator. Soon he had graduated to home-made pickups, playing through radios and phonographs and leaving a trail of burned-out appliances behind him. When DeArmond

TOM COPI/MICHAEL OCHS


Johnny Winter


Stevie Ray Vaughan

came out with its pioneering guitar pickup in the Thirties, Durham was among the first to use it. In 1937, he met another young local guitarist, Charlie Christian, and they traded amplification arcana.

In parallel to these developments, amplified guitar and lap-steel guitar quickly made inroads to the Western swing music scene. The most startling of the early electric steel players was Bob Dunn, a featured soloist with Milton Brown and His Musical Brownies. Dunn played pedal steel like a modernist-leaning trumpeter: isolated bursts of notes, daring harmonic choices, unpredictable phrasing that could be jagged one minute and flow like honey the next. By the end of the Thirties, Milton Brown's band had broken up (following the leader's death on the highway), and the best-known, most influential Western swing pickers were guitarists Eldon Shamblin and steel guitarist Leon ("Take it away, Leon!") McAuliffe, both of whom were featured with Bob Wills. Nobody who's heard Bob Dunn's twisted steel lines come cascading out of a charming piece of Milton Brown square-dance hokum can forget the experience. The guy was one of a kind, and his few recording must only hint at his weird genius.

After World War II, electric guitars and guitarists continued to proliferate, challenging and eventually supplanting the saxophone as vernacular music's principal solo voice. Iconoclastic, quasi-free-form blues guitarists in the Blind Lemon tradition—Lightnin' Hopkins, Frankie Lee Sims, the Black Ace and others—plugged in and rocked the juke joints and taverns, but the T-Bone Walker mode was dominant, and in the Forties and Fifties Texas produced an astonishing number of influential, wildly kinetic and competitive lead guitarist/blues singers. Even a limited list would have to include iconic figures such as Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, Pee Wee Crayton, Freddie King, Albert Collins, Johnny Copeland, Lowell Fulson, Cal Green (Hank Ballard and the Midnighters' axman), Clarence Garlow, Roy Gaines and Goree Carter (whose 1949 "Rock Awhile" is a worthy candidate for "first-ever rock and roll record"), not to mention legendary session guitarists such as Wayne Bennett and Clarence Holloman and lap-steel playing bluesmen Sonny Rhodes and Hop Wilson. Most of these guitarists fronted bands with a small horn section of saxes and brass as well as the standard piano, bass and drums. The close connection between blues and jazz in Texas was still much in evidence.

Artists such as these often performed locally, bringing their shows not just to cities and towns but also to rough, rural dance halls. This rich musical environment had everything to do with the growth and development of younger musicians coming of age in the Sixties. For electric guitarists Johnny Winter, Jimmie and Stevie Ray Vaughan and Doug Sahm, as well as for acoustically minded pickers like Willie Nelson and Townes Van Zandt, blues was much more than a musical language acquired from obscure phonograph records; it was a language they shared with the form's mostly black creators, often from early childhood. As a result, Texas guitarists seem to have a genuine, deeply rooted feel for the blues, whatever their color. When Stevie Ray Vaughan soared on minor-key blues changes, or when Van Zandt picks and sings one of his 10- and 11-bar originals, there can be no doubt this is the blues. We shouldn't be surprised: from Bob Dunn to honky-tonk's Lefty Frizzell to rockabilly's Sleepy LaBeef, Texas guitarists have been playing and singing idiomatic, natural blues for generations.

BIG STATE, BIGGER QUESTIONS

Why is this significant and substantial musical culture still relatively little known and underappreciated? Texas was an incubator—perhaps *the* incubator—for blues and boogie-woogie at the beginning of this century, and later for electric blues, honky-tonk and important developments in country swing and rock. Yet we hear and read much more about the Delta, Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. In part, Delta blues has attracted fans and boosters with its rawer and more in-your-face approach, which features aggressively driving, syncopated cross-rhythms. And Delta music has a potent mystique—hellhounds on your trail, the blues and the devil walking side by side, selling your soul to the dark man at the crossroads. To some degree, this mystique was calculated from the very beginning: early bluesmen such as Tommy Johnson, Son House and Muddy Waters knew that invoking hoodoo not only played to the beliefs and fears of their audience in the joints but also helped them to craft an image. And it sold records.

Texas has its own brand of hoodoo, and it has seeped into tunes like Hop Wilson's odes to his baby's black-cat bone. But the deep, heavy, serious metaphysical baggage that comes with so much Delta blues is rare in Texas, where blues is, above all, music for entertainment and dancing, or for chronicling the ups and downs of day-to-day experience, as in the autobiographical blues of Lightnin' Hopkins.

Delta blues is a kind of sacred music, opposed to the church but espousing its own African-rooted spiritual values. In Texas, on the other hand, blues tends to be resolutely, unapologetically secular, sensuous, even carnal, like rock and roll. The blues scholars may not all get it, but musicians do; there isn't a blues guitarist alive who hasn't picked up something from T-Bone Walker or one of his disciples, just as no jazz guitarist for decades has remained untouched by the innovations of Charlie Christian. Among Texas guitarists, musical standards are particularly high, which is why you'll find even B.B. King worshipping at T-Bone's feet. That Texas blues just keeps loping along, but these days it's more like an express train than a mule.

WINTER: MICHAEL HALSBAND; SRV: DON HUNSTEIN

continued from page 19

ing with the Stones in the era when they were doing things like "Wild Horses," "Dead Flowers" and "Country Honk." Along with that there was Poco, the Eagles...just a real fun, 'let's be cowboys for a day' kind of thing.

"So not wanting to be left behind, we took measures to see if we could stay in step with the trend. Some fans were surprised. But some of them remembered that our second single, 'Shakin' Your Tree,' had pedal steel on it. And one of my all time favorite country-tinged ZZ Top numbers is 'Mexican Blackbird' from *Fandango*, which is definitely a slidester's chewed-up version of rock-meets-country, inspired by that particular period."

But what's interesting is that there's a bit of Keef in Billy's country playing. The chordal voicings and edgy clean tones on both "It's Only Love" and "She's a Heartbreaker" owe a lot to Keith Richards' London take on the country idiom.

"Oh, without a doubt," Billy admits. "The Stones have been a benchmark for so many aspiring rock musicians. They're true-blue interpreters of American music. They took up the blues and R&B at a time when it was by and large being dismissed at home. And they explored country music in the same way. They were pals with some of those California bands. And, yes, I would spend hours upon hours studying Keith's playing style and his chord voicings. It took me a long time to realize he played a five-string Telecaster in open G. Boy, that was a brand-new day when I figured that one out!"

Hill and Gibbons in 1991

THE LONG HIATUS: ZZ TOP EXPLORE THE GLOBE

Shortly after the release of *Tejas*, ZZ Top decided it was time for a break. They'd been touring hard and heavy since 1970, and the logistical rigors of the Worldwide Texas Tour would've been enough to kill lesser men. "It started out that we were going to take a 90-day hiatus from public appearances," Billy says. "That allowed us to enjoy a little getaway. Frank went to Jamaica, Dusty went to Mexico, and I was off to Europe. Well, three months became six months, which became a year, which became two years. We were still in touch, but it was kind of a long-distance love affair."

Asked what brought him to Europe, Billy promptly answers, "The first Fripp and Eno album, *No Pussyfooting*." Gibbons had become intrigued with the European art rock movement of the Seventies. Former King Crimson guitarist Robert Fripp and Roxy Music vet Brian Eno had become part of a scene that also included players like Pink Floyd associate Robert Wyatt and guitarists Fred Frith and Kevin Ayers, playing in bands like the Art Bears and Henry Cow. It was all a mighty long way from Texas, but it did involve making noises with guitars. So Billy was down.

"Granted, during the Moving Sidewalks days, we got to know Robert Wyatt from the Soft Machine," Billy says. "Talk about head-trip, way-out-there art rock. And in the Seventies there was a lot of that scene going on in England. And if you check out the liner notes to some of those early Fripp and Eno releases, they go to great lengths to reveal their studio system: 'You have to go through an echo unit here, then run the signal through this...' It becomes quite fascinating, not only as an insight to what they're doing; it also stimulates one's own curiosity: Wow, if they can do that, I wonder if I can do this. But some of the really obtuse art rock was coming out of Paris, France. So I spent some time there, too."

Billy also got interested in reggae music. The Jamaican musical idiom was at a high point in the Seventies and very much a part of the decade's "alternative" musical Zeitgeist. Billy got to know both Bob Marley and Peter Tosh, spending some time in Trinidad with Marley.

"Bob was an intense kind of guy," Billy says of the reggae icon: "very set on doing things his way. He was a great leader for that outfit [*the Wailers*]. He had an incredible rhythm section behind him: [*drummer*] Carly and [*bassist*] Aston Barrett. Carly Barrett's treatment of the beat was so unique. There isn't a two or a four in early reggae. There was a name given to that beat: "the one drop." The reggae sound coming out of Jamaica in that glorious period from 1971–77 is to this day considered the real essence of when reggae ruled."

THE WARNER YEARS, PHASE ONE (1979–81): NEW STYLES IN MUSIC AND FACIAL HAIR

So when ZZ Top finally reconvened in 1979, Billy's musical perspective had been stretched in several new directions. Frank had picked up some Jamaican influence as well. It was the start of a new era for the group in many ways.

ANN SUMMA

They had also left London Records and signed a deal with Warner Bros.

All these paradigm shifts are reflected on the band's first album for their new label, *Deguello* (1979). There is a greater emphasis on clean chorusy guitar tones than ever before, and an arch sense of postmodern irony in songs like "Cheap Sunglasses" and "Fool for Your Stockings." It all very much reflects the impact of new wave, the postpunk musical style that rubbed shoulders with art rock in the late Seventies. (Eno had gone on to produce Devo and the Talking Heads; Fripp had formed the League of Gentlemen with a trio of new wave musicians.) In true DIY punk/new wave fashion, the members of ZZ Top even taught themselves to play saxophone in order to add some horn charts to the disc.

"One of the highest compliments at the time," Billy recalls, "came from the late rock critic Lester Bangs, who said that 'Cheap Sunglasses' was chosen as a favorite by someone wearing purple hair who did not realize who they were listening to. Thank you Lester, thank you purple hair, thank you cheap sunglasses, thank you Ray Charles."

The cowboy hats all but disappeared around this time. But there was plenty on *Deguello* for old-time fans to dig, like the bluesy fave "I'm Bad, I'm Nationwide," with its searing lead tones. The guitar solo in "She Loves My Automobile" quotes the Freddie King blues instrumental classic "The Stumble," popularized by Peter Green in John Mayall's Bluesbreakers. A double-entendre lyric to "She Loves My Automobile" is very much in the risqué R&B style of Forties great Louis Jordan. ZZ Top had managed to reinvent themselves for a new era while remaining firmly grounded in their blues roots.

But just to help smooth the way into this new era of ZZ Top, the band unleashed the greatest and most protracted PR stunt of its career: the beards. While on hiatus, Billy and Dusty had gotten out of the habit of shaving. Hanging with the Rasta men, Billy must have received extra encouragement to throw away the razor. And when they got back together Gibbons and Hill decided to keep the beard thing going. Despite his name, Frank Beard refused to participate. He does however, sport the occasional moustache and/or goatee.

The ZZ Top beards are rock's greatest MacGuffin. A MacGuffin is a cinematic trick invented by the great director Alfred Hitchcock. It's an object that captures the audience's attention (a mysterious box, which may or may not contain a bomb, for instance) while key plot developments are snuck past the viewer in order to prepare a surprise ending. So here ZZ Top had appreciably changed their musical style and signed with a new label, but all anyone could talk about were the beards. Press for the album tended to revolve around beard jokes, beard cartoons, funny fake beards on people who weren't in the band... From this moment forward, ZZ Top would be "those guys with the beards."

And in growing those whiskers, they'd written themselves an unlimited musical license. They could decide to become a classical string trio or a trad jazz outfit and they'd still be "those guys with the beards." As with the Worldwide Texas Tour, they'd taken some natural aspect of their lives and found a way to put it to creative use.

ZZ Top's next album, *El Loco* (1981), continued in the vein of *Deguello*: clean, chorused/phased/flanged guitar tones and rampant double entendres. You don't have to be a lit major to catch the phallic references in "Tube Snake Boogie" and "It's So Hard." "I Wanna Drive You Home," could be an answer song to "She Loves My Automobile." And "Pearl Necklace" is their famous poetic euphemism for fellatio.

THE WARNER YEARS, PHASE TWO (1983–1992): MTV'S MOST UNLIKELY IDOLS

The reinvention of ZZ Top really kicked into high gear on ZZ Top's third Warner Bros. release, *Eliminator* (1983). The band's most successful album ever, it is also their most controversial recording. Some longtime fans were horrified by their embrace of synthesizer and drum machine technology, not to mention their ascendancy on MTV, the then-brand-new medium that had become the domain of Duran Duran, Michael Jackson and Madonna. To this day Billy is loathe to talk about the electronic elements of *Eliminator*. "My guitar-collecting, screw-counting buddies don't want anything but tube amps and Pearly Gates," he says, visibly squirming in his chair.

But the controversy over the instrumentation on *Eliminator* tends to overlook a more important point: the album contains some of the best songs the band has ever written. "Gimmie All Your Lovin' " is perhaps the hookiest, most infectious thing in the entire ZZ Top canon. It's not that far removed, lyrically or melodically, from "It's Only Love," a highlight of the cowboy hat period. And, like it or not, *Eliminator* classics like "Gimmie All Your Lovin,' " "Legs" and "Sharp Dressed Man" had an enormous impact on the popular culture of the early Eighties and are the songs for which ZZ Top will most likely be remembered in 100 years.

" 'Legs' wouldn't be 'Legs' unless it had that driving synth bass," Dusty Hill points out. "We wrote the song with that in mind. We wanted it to be a big part of the song."

"It was a brand-new day, in terms of how records were made," Billy adds. "And guess what? We were listening to and liking records made using this new technology. Take one of my favorite bands at the time, Depeche Mode: they were producing some of the heaviest stuff I ever heard. Some people didn't get it, but I think that was a perceptual thing. You look onstage and see a guy singing. And behind him there's three guys with black boxes. But where's the drums? Where's the guitars and amps? There was an assumption on the part of some that the music couldn't be heavy without drums or guitars. But man, you crank some early Depeche Mode on a big sound system with some giant subwoofers, and it's some of the heaviest stuff ever."

Those who focus unduly on the presence of synths and drum machines on *Eliminator* are also overlooking some of the most inventive and downright nasty guitar work Billy F. Gibbons has every laid to tape, or any other recording medium, for that matter. The album was created at Ardent, the same studio that produced *Fandango* and *Tejas*, and ZZ Top were doing exactly what they did on those albums: going crazy with the gear they found in Ardent's storage rooms.

"When we went back into Ardent after our hiatus, the storage vault for gear had increased threefold," Billy recalls. "And the uncharted rooms had all this weird new stuff: new amps, studio gear and things with keyboards, but they had knobs on them. Like, 'That looks like a piano, but it sure ain't no piano!' So there was a timely, unplanned and unexpected coupling of this unknown world of new gear with what we knew. What we focused on was making good, solid tempo the new champion of the groove." Meanwhile, Billy's own vintage amp collection had increased exponentially. "I began collecting the 2x10 Fender Dual Professionals. We had found a bunch of them. They were 18-watt amps, and like all vintage gear—particularly tube amps from the Fifties—each one I found was a little bit different tonally. We also just loved the sound of Fender Champs, Harvards, Princetons, Pros, Bassmans, Tremoluxes... And we said, 'Why restrict it to just one? We may find a combination of a few of these amps that works.' "

However, this proved a logistical nightmare when it came to miking so many amps. Thus, Billy's infamous "amp cabin" came into being. "Instead of lining up 10 or 15 amplifiers with a mic on each one," Billy explains, "or having to move a mic each time we wanted to try a different amp, we built a square of amps all facing inward, with one microphone in the middle. And we put a second stack of amps on top of those—all different ones. The idea was, Let's put every type of amp on there. As for the third row of amps, we didn't want them to get too far from the mic, so they were put on top, aiming down. And somebody said, 'Looks like a little ol' cabin,' so we named it the amp cabin. We had one of every odd, previously unused amp in this structure, just to see what would happen. This was an extreme example of ZZ Top learning how to experiment with different things."

But it wasn't all small combo amps on *Eliminator*. "One of the great tonal combinations," Billy says, "is a 100-watt Marshall, either single cabinet or a stack of two, and a solid-state Vox Super Beatle. The Super Beatle does something that the Marshall didn't, and vice versa. But combined, the sound is really rich. I'm pretty sure that 'Gimmie All Your Lovin' ' and 'Sharp Dressed Man' enjoyed that combination.

"Another oddball amp we had was a Legend 50, a 50-watt 2x12 combo made by a company called Legend Amps. It had a raw wood cabinet with a cane grill. That became a cornerstone amp on *Eliminator*. That was part of the formula. It consistently sounded good."

As for guitars, Billy says, "Pearly was always present, and there was a Dean guitar that worked consistently. It was a weird half Explorer, half Flying V Dean, but with a small body. It was a tuning nightmare. Hours at a time. But it sounded really good. Besides that, there was always a Fender Esquire at hand. I've got two favorites, a '51 with a black pickguard and a '56

with a white guard and bigger neck."

The title *Eliminator* comes from drag racing. It's a term for the winning car in a race, the one that eliminates the competition. The Eliminator is also the name of an actual car, a heavily customized early Thirties coupe that Billy had created in tandem with a small army of automotive chop artists. His passion for wildly customized guitars is equaled only by his fascination with tweaked-out automotive custom jobs. The Eliminator coupe is depicted on the cover of the *Eliminator* album and it became a main protagonist in the series of video clips that the band created for the Eliminator singles: "Gimmie All Your Lovin'," "Sharp Dressed Man" and "Legs."

It was the early days of MTV. The channel had been created in 1981 around the concept of showing music videos nonstop, all day long. There was a shortage of material in those early years, and the clichés of rock video hadn't been invented yet. ZZ Top were initially unsure if they should even enter this new medium. As Billy has pointed out, they're hardly fashion models. But he had an idea. Rather than make the group the focus of the video clips, he decided to fill them with the things he loves most: hot cars, bizarre custom guitars and sexy chicks—the main components of the male American dream.

It a sense, the ZZ Top videos are all MacGuffins. They're filled with eye-catching distractions that draw attention away from the three aging rock and rollers who actually created the music. In that regard, they do the opposite of what a music video is supposed to do: spotlight the artist. Ironically enough, it proved to be a wildly successful formula.

"We decided, 'Why don't we let the story tell itself?' " says Dusty Hill. "And let's have some girls in there to look at. We'll be more observers and advice-givers or whatever. The girls were a real easy decision to make. I didn't hear a 'no' vote anywhere."

And so three grizzled sidewinders who had been around since the days of love beads and Nehru shirts found themselves prominent members of the new, Eighties pop pantheon, sharing the limelight with pretty-boy synth bands and singing, dancing disco divas. In keeping with the eternal generosity of the freak circus called rock, the bearded misfits were accepted with open arms. *Eliminator* went 10 times Platinum.

The *Eliminator* coupe morphed into a hot-rod spacecraft on the cover of *Afterburner* (1985). The sound offers the same blend of Eighties synth sparkle and vintage midcentury guitar tone. Perhaps the trio was doing a lot of camping at the time. This was the album that gave the world "Sleeping Bag," "Woke Up with Wood" and "Velcro Fly." It also contained the only power ballad in the ZZ Top canon, "Rough Boy." With cavernous, digitally detuned drums and layers of velvety synth chording, it was another huge hit for them: a slow dance fave, but also somehow believable. How else can guy who hasn't shaved in eight years seduce a lady than by offering himself up as a "Rough Boy."

"I don't think we lost any male fans with that one," Hill says, "but I think we got a lot more female fans. Women really liked 'Rough Boy.' "

Recycler is the third and last in the series that Billy calls ZZ Top's "-er" albums. *Recycler* is perhaps too aptly named. Synth-pop was dead as a doornail by 1990, when the disc was released, and the *Eliminator* formula, so fresh at first, was starting to sound mighty stale. The band seemed to realize it. *Recycler*'s most successful track, "My Head's in Mississippi," harks back to the bluesy grind of ZZ Top's earlier days, while also hinting at what was to come. The guitar track features another Billy custom guitar, La Warpa, a surrealistically contoured cross between an Explorer and a Strat, equipped with a single humbucker.

Billy's head had indeed been in Mississippi during that period. In 1988, he'd collaborated with Pyramid Guitars to create the Muddywood, a guitar constructed from a roof timber taken from the cabin in Mississippi where blues great Muddy Waters had been born. Once completed, the guitar was presented by ZZ Top to the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, Mississippi, an institution dedicated to the preservation of blues traditions that the band had helped establish and continue to support. At the dawn of the Nineties, there was every indication that the synth thing was over. ZZ Top were ready to return to their roots.

THE RCA/BMG YEARS (1992–present): REFUGE IN THE HOME OF ELVIS

In 1992, ZZ Top signed a new record deal with RCA for what was reported in the trade press to be a whoppin' great chunk of money, a phenomenal deal even for those wild, crazy, high-flyin', Bill Clinton, dot.com bubble Nineties. A bonus for Dusty Hill was that RCA had been the label of his number-one rock and roll hero, Elvis Presley.

"Yeah, that was the reason we signed with RCA. It had nothin' to do with the money," Hill joked at the time.

ZZ Top's first album for their new label was *Antenna* (1993), a stripped-down, lean-and-nasty restatement of the core ZZ Top values: gritty blues and the sound of steel strings amplified through vintage tubes. The title of the album paid homage to the lawless Texas radio stations that had inspired Gibbons, Hill and Beard when they were kids.

Rhythmeen (1996) came next. It too is a raw and bluesy outing, but as always, Billy had a few twists to add to the plot. "During the recording of *Rhythmeen*," he explains, "[*producer*] Rick Rubin had turned me on to one of his acts called Barkmarket. Wow. Just a scary band. And the guitar players' favorite tuning was down to Cs and B, so we began experimenting with really low tunings. *Rhythmeen* is probably the best example of ZZ Top's foray into the super-low frequencies. It not only changes the way you play but the way an instrument begins to sound. There's a standard tuning, but who says so? It's whatever you come up with."

Billy's fascination with collecting African artifacts began around the time of *Rhythmeen*. This, too, is reflected on the disc: several tracks feature African tribal percussion instruments from Billy's collection, including massive log drums. Some of these currently reside in the front yard of the guitarist's Hollywood residence, beautiful lawn sculptures that, like most African *objets d'art*, are functional as well.

"When we were in the studio recording the log drums," Billy says, "the engineer kept coming on the talkback saying, 'Is something broken in there? I keep hearing this rattle.' We checked the drum kit, the guitars and amps, but finally we realized the sound was coming from the log drums. Inside we found these bits of rubber, shapeless chunks right from a rubber tree. Apparently they'd been put in there deliberately, to create this buzz when you hit the drum. So those African tribesmen, they knew about distortion, man!"

ZZ Top celebrated their 30th Anniversary in 1999 with *XXX*, another fine collection of Delta musings and double entendres, this time with a hip-hop influence thrown into the mix. The band's most recent release is *Mescalero* (2003), a potent distillation of all that is intoxicating about ZZ Top. Against a grainy backdrop of dirty guitars, Billy sings in a sepulchral croak that could peel the paint off of Tom Waits' barn. There's even a leering, leather-lunged Dusty number, "Piece." The disc brings the boys back to La Frontera—there's the occasional dash of marimba, concertina and lyrics en Español—and the cover art replays the "Eliminator" video as a Mexican Day of the Dead cartoon. Though drunk and long deceased, the guy gets the girl and roars off down the highway. On the roadside, three bony hands flash the victory sign. Los Tres Hombres rock on.

POSTSCRIPT: BIG PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

At the time of this writing, Billy Gibbons is in the midst of installing a recording studio in the ground level of his Hollywood place. At the time I visited him, the project (or perhaps Billy's marriage) was at a stage that necessitated that he camp out on the barren, exposed-brick ground level of the house rather than sleep in any of the beautifully appointed rooms upstairs. And so a mattress lay in the middle of the floor, with the strange paraphernalia of Billy's unorthodox lifestyle strewn around it in every direction. There were vinyl records, CDs, high-tech computer gear, phone equipment, teddy bears, ketchup bottles, mailing tubes, sundry stationery items, cardboard boxes, boom boxes and, of course, guitar gear of every description. It looked like an adolescent boy's messy bedroom or some kind of hippie squat.

Leading the way through the rubble, Billy outlined his plans for the place. His intention is to configure it identically to Foam Box in Houston, matching the gear and room acoustics as closely as possible. Doing this will make it easy for Billy to move his musical projects from place to place, following the ramblings of his peripatetic mode of existence. Among the projects he is planning are a solo album, an EP with his pal Keith Richards and a disc of ZZ Top classics as performed by the band today.

Will any of these recordings ever see the light of day? With Billy F. Gibbons, there's no way of telling. That's another one of the rules. But it's nice to know that his hyperactive, uniquely creative brain shows no sign of slowing down.

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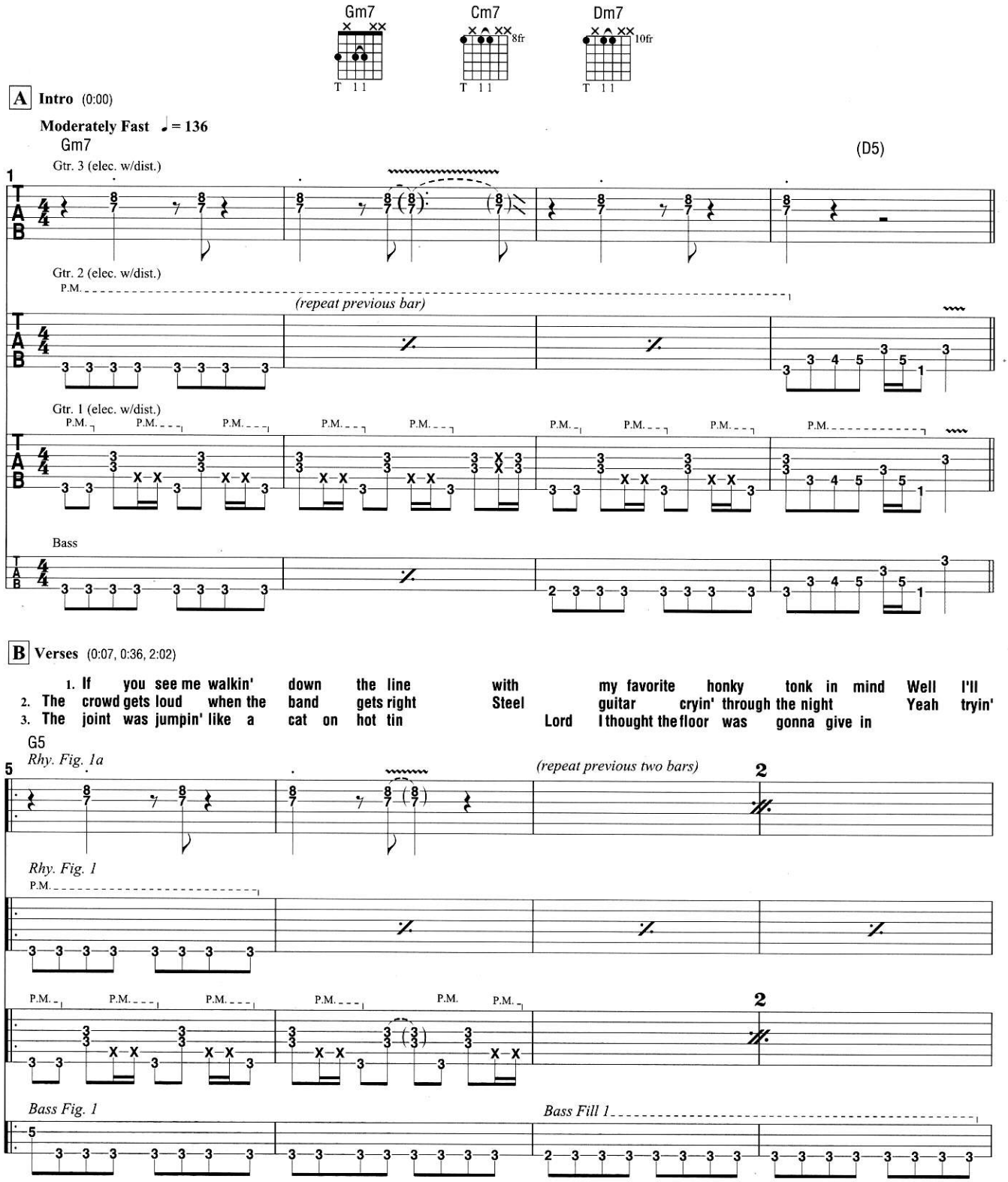
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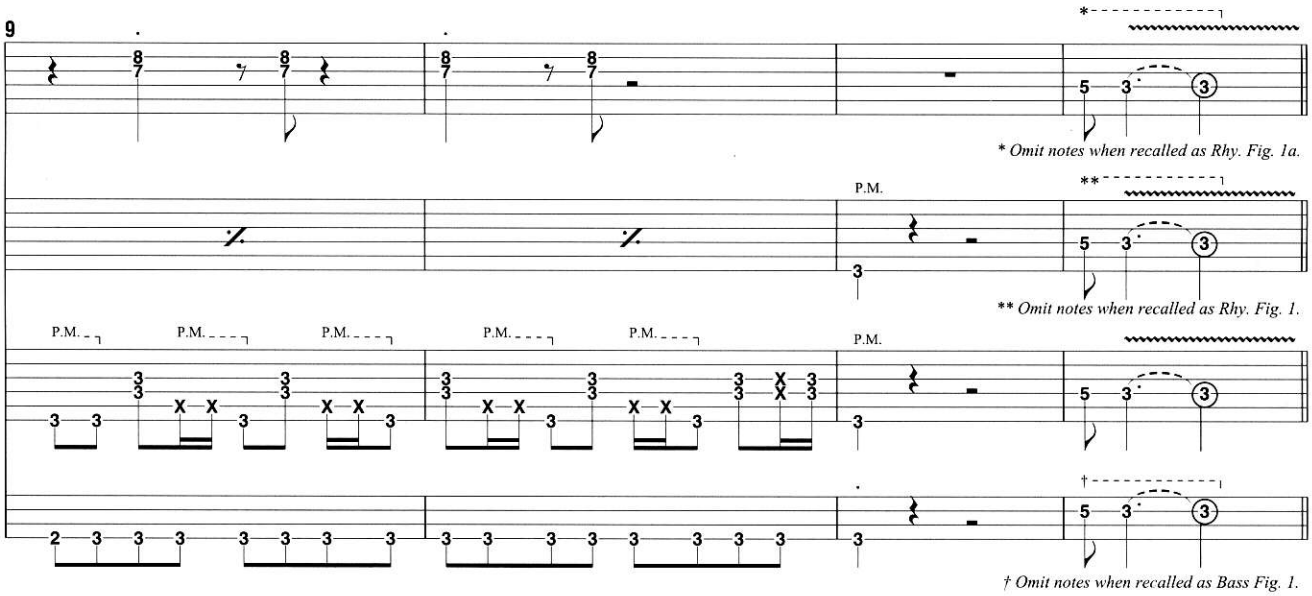
be here around suppertime with my can of dinner and a bunch of fine Ah
to cover up the corner fight but everything's cool 'cause they's just tight Beer
Sound a lot like a house congressional 'cause we're experimental and professional



* Omit notes when recalled as Rhy. Fig. 1a.

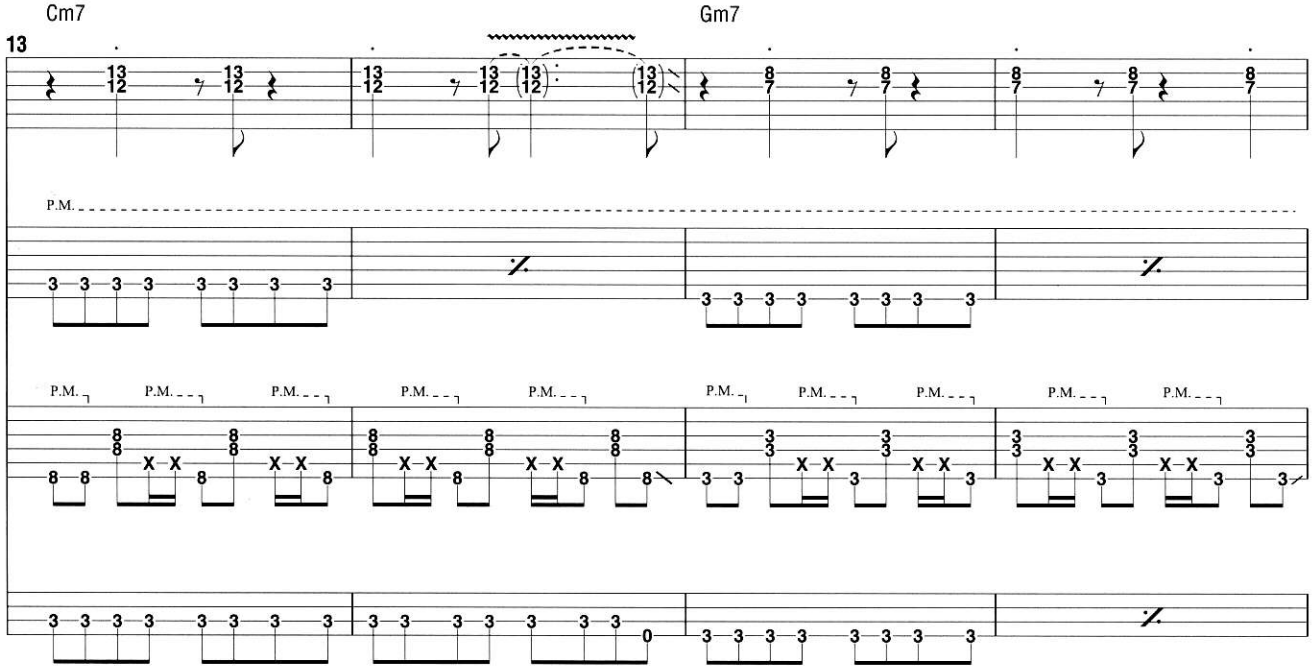
** Omit notes when recalled as Rhy. Fig. 1.

† Omit notes when recalled as Bass Fig. 1.

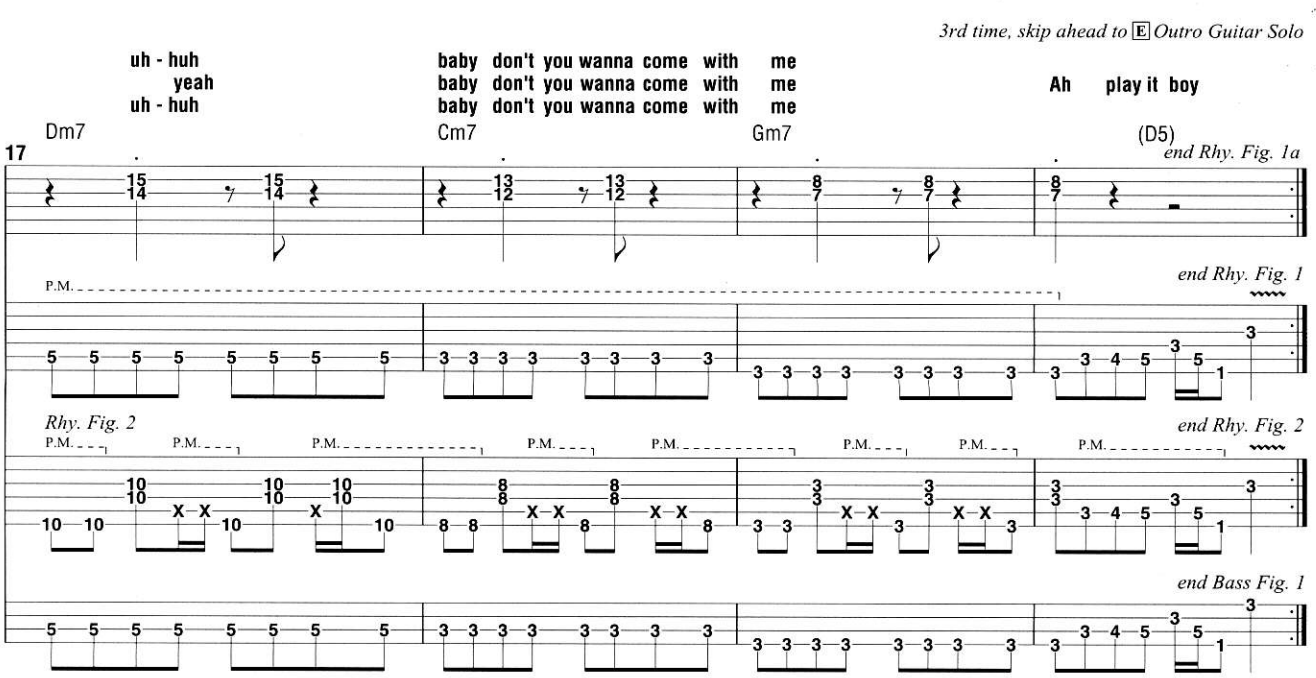
C **Chorus** (0:22, 0:51, 2:17)

(1.) beer drinkers and hell raisers yeah
(2.) drinkers and hell raisers yeah
(3.) Beer drinkers hell raisers yeah

Cm7 Gm7



"BEER DRINKERS & HELL RAISERS"

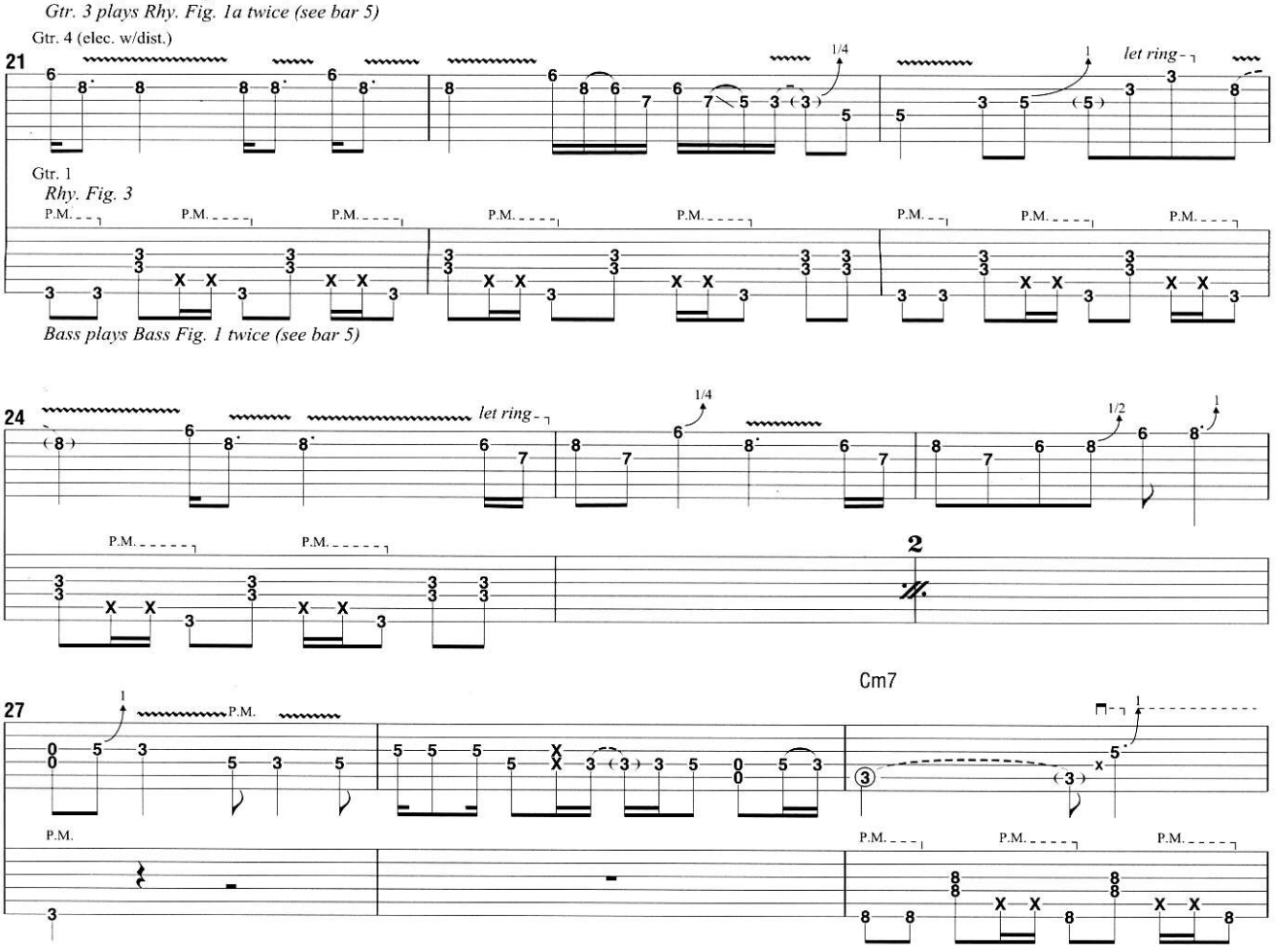


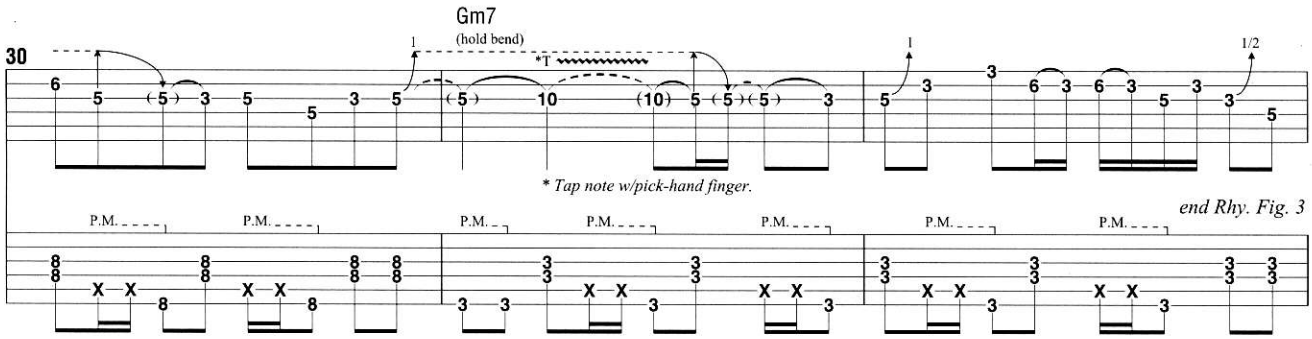
D **Guitar Solo** (1:05)

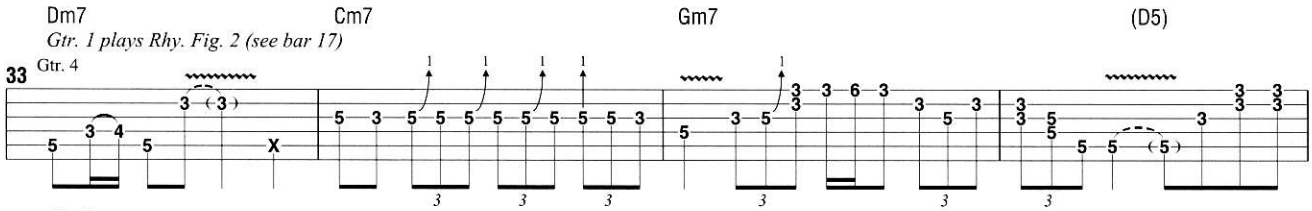
Gm7

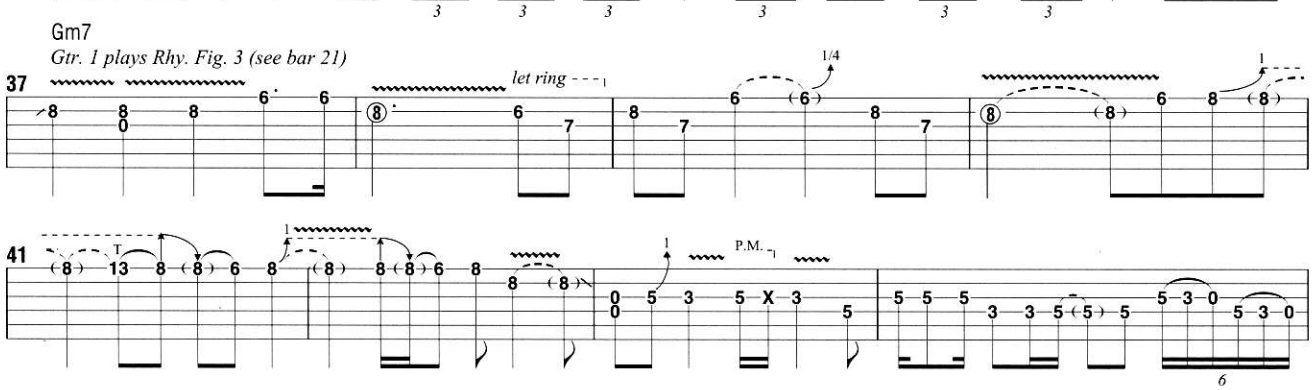
Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 1 twice (see bar 5)

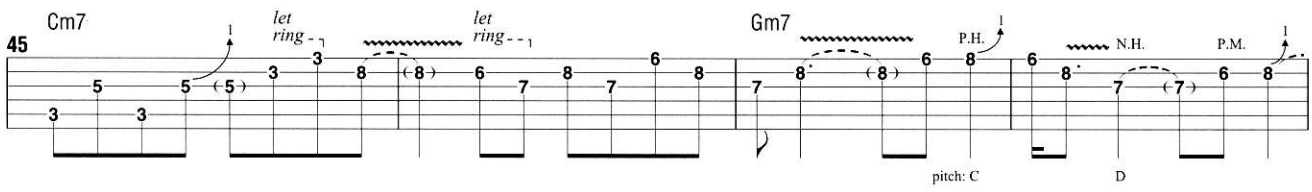
Gtr. 3 plays Rhy. Fig. 1a twice (see bar 5)

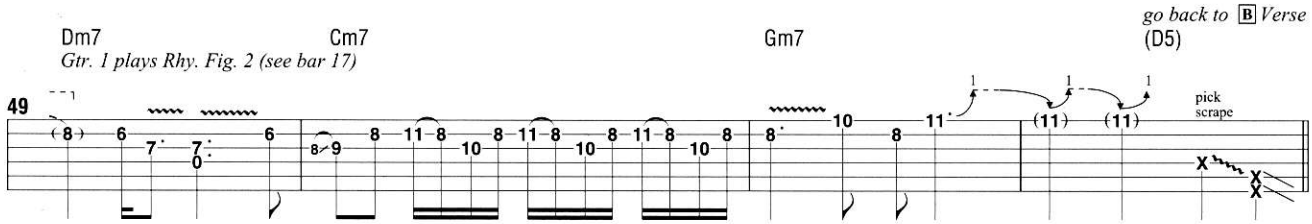








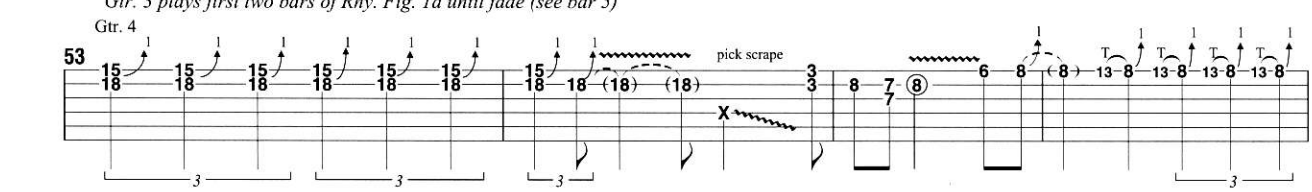




E **Outro Guitar Solo** (2:31)

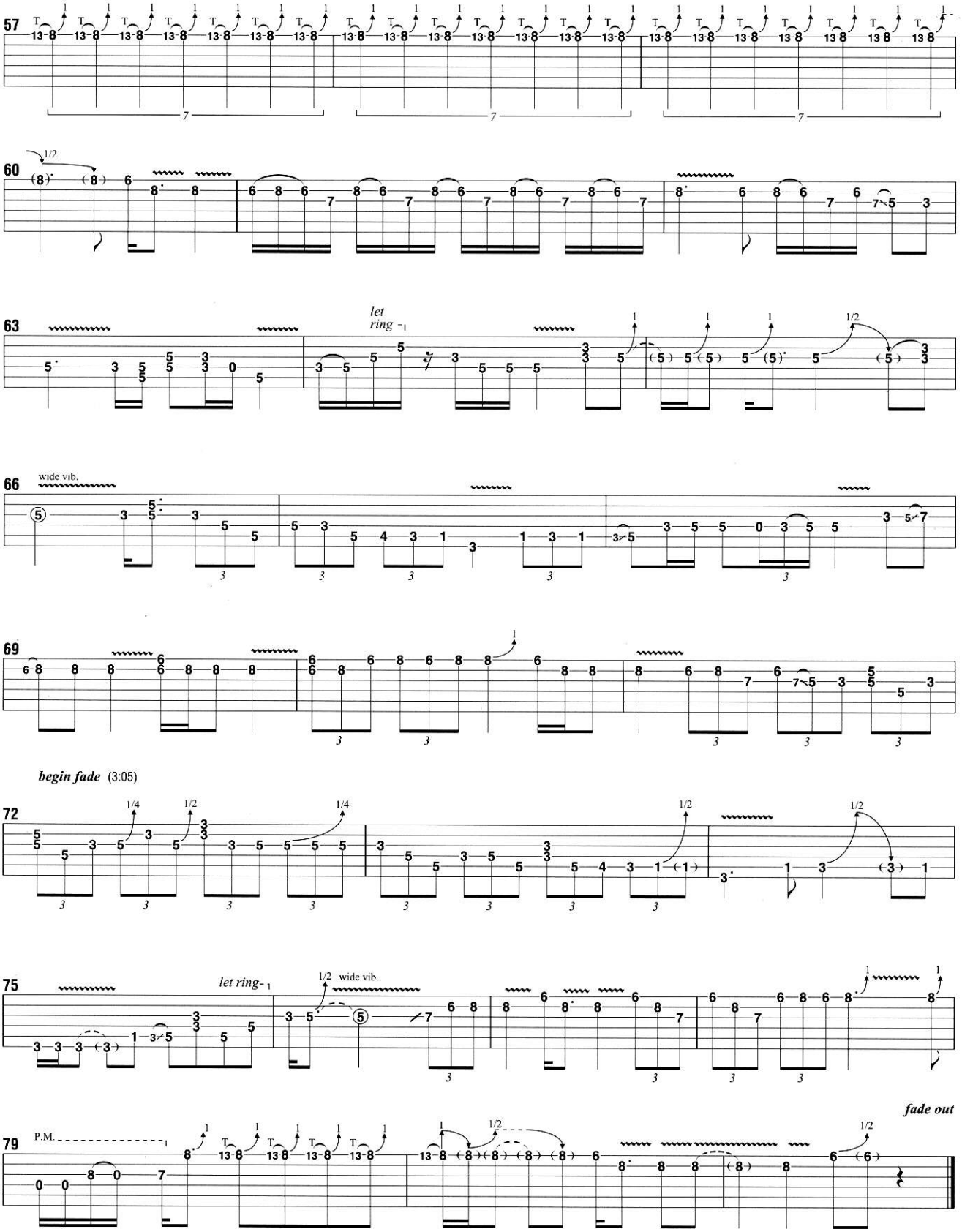
G5

Gtr. 1 plays first two bars of Rhy. Fig. 3 until fade (see bar 21)
Gtr. 2 plays first two bars of Rhy. Fig. 1 until fade (see bar 5)
Gtr. 3 plays first two bars of Rhy. Fig. 1a until fade (see bar 5)



Bass plays Bass Fill 1 until fade (see bar 7)

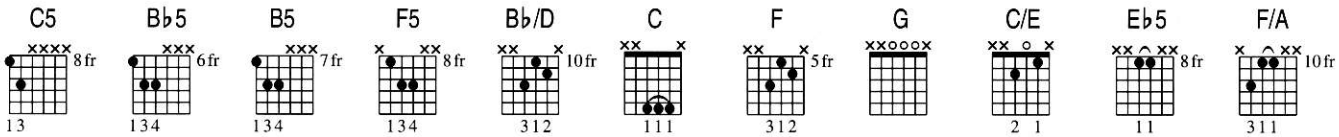
"BEER DRINKERS & HELL RAISERS"



"I'M BAD, I'M NATIONWIDE"

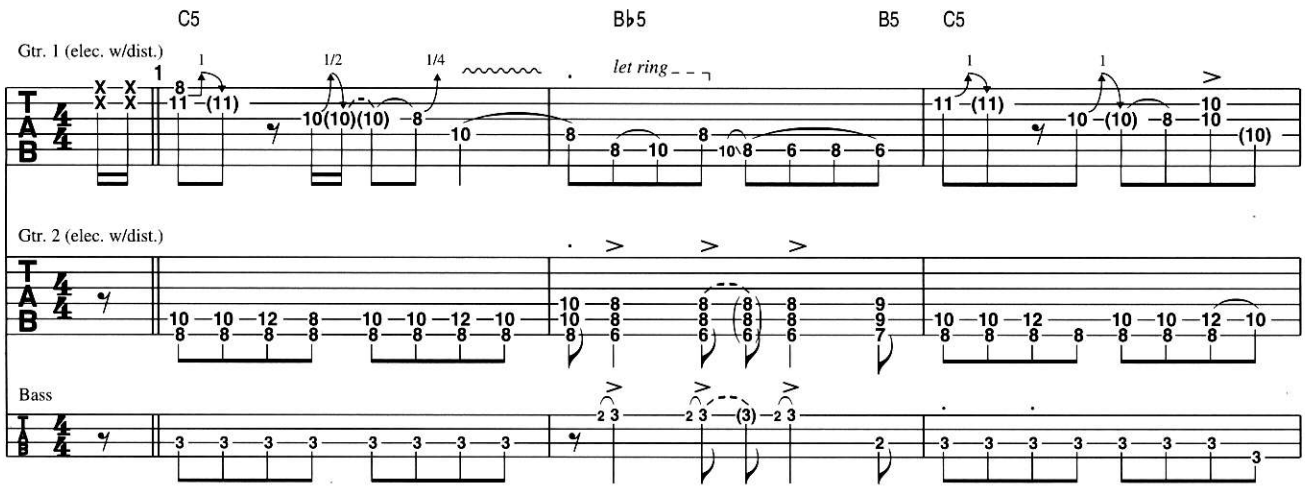
As heard on **DEGÜELLO** (WARNER BROS.)

Words and Music by **Billy F. Gibbons, Dusty Hill and Frank Beard** • *Transcribed by* **Jesse Gress**



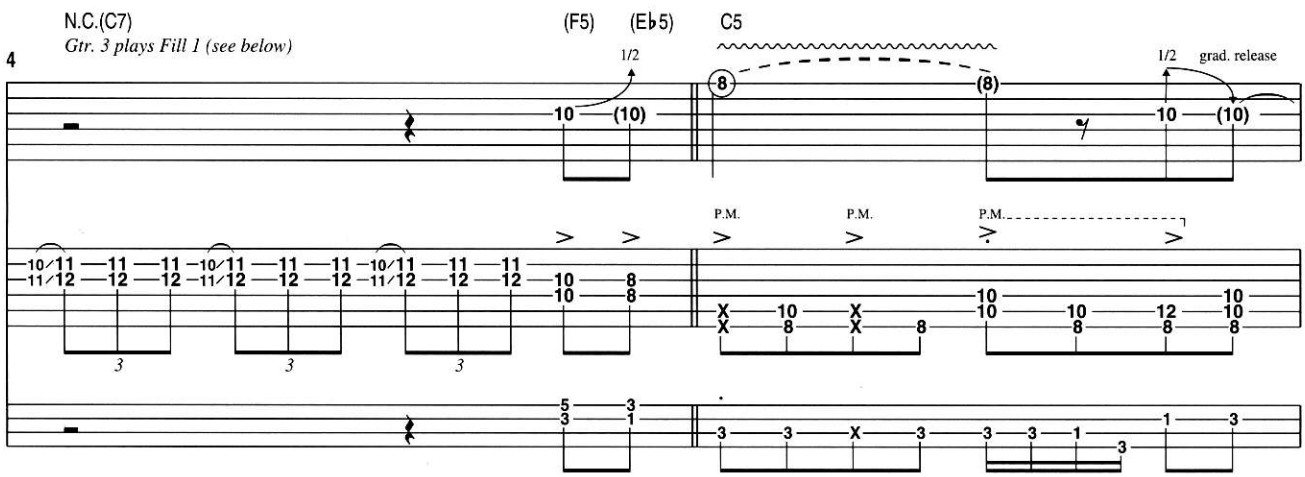
A **Intro** (0:00)

Moderately ♩ = 104

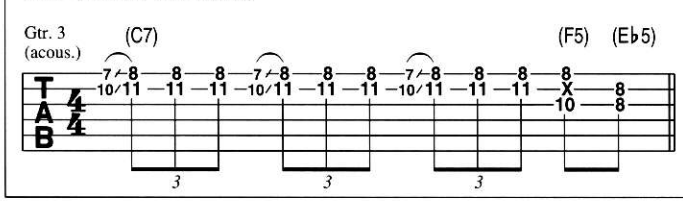


Tempo 2 ♩ = 80

B **Tempo 1** ♩ = 104 (0:10, 2:35)



Fill 1 (0:07, 0:55, 1:33, 2:32, 3:19)



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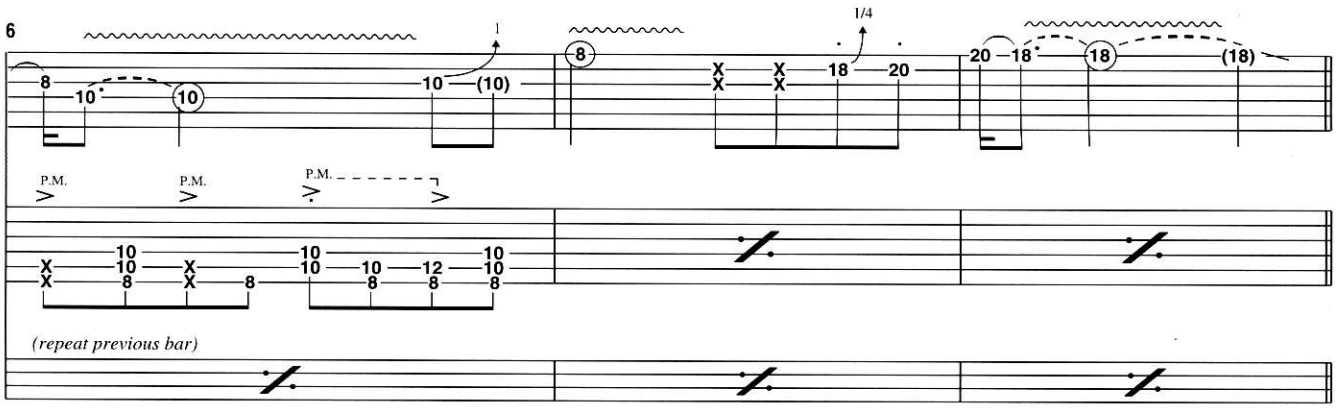
"I'M BAD, I'M NATIONWIDE"

1. Well I was
3. Well I was



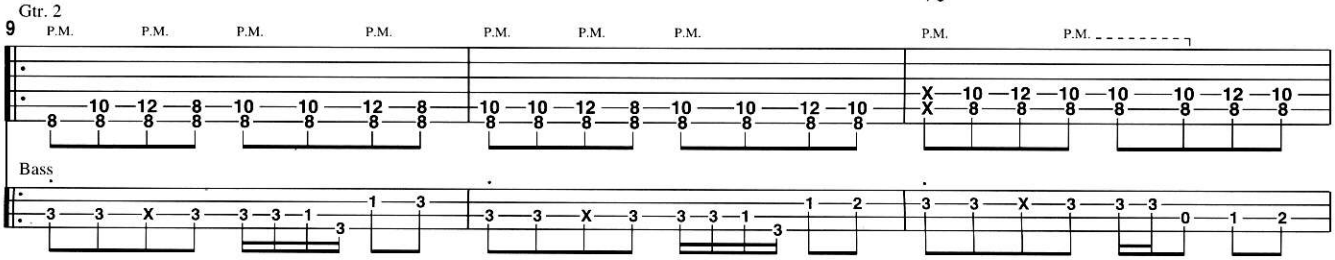
C **Verses** (0:20, 0:58, 2:44)

Tempo 1 ♩ = 104

(1.) rollin' down the road in some cold blue steel I had a bluesman on the back and a beau-
2. Easin' down the highway in a new Cadillac I had a fine fox in front I had
(3.) movin' down the road in my V - 8 Ford I had a shine on my boots I had my

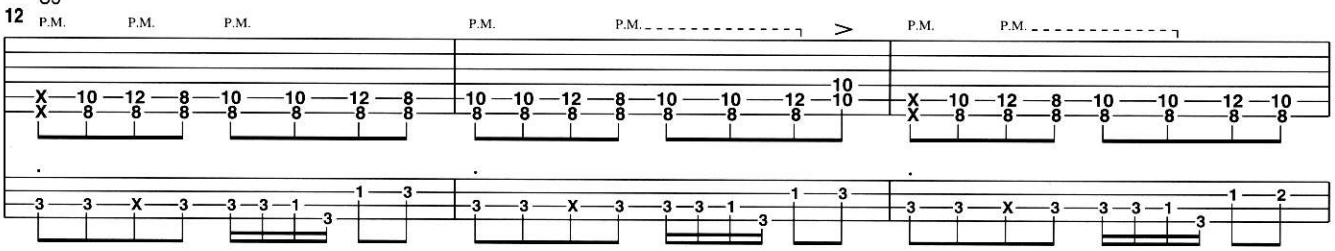
C5 F5

Gtr. 2



tician at the wheel We're goin' downtown in the middle of the night We're
three more in the back They sportin' short dresses wearin' spike-heel shoes They
sideburns lowered With my New York brim and my gold tooth displayed no -

C5



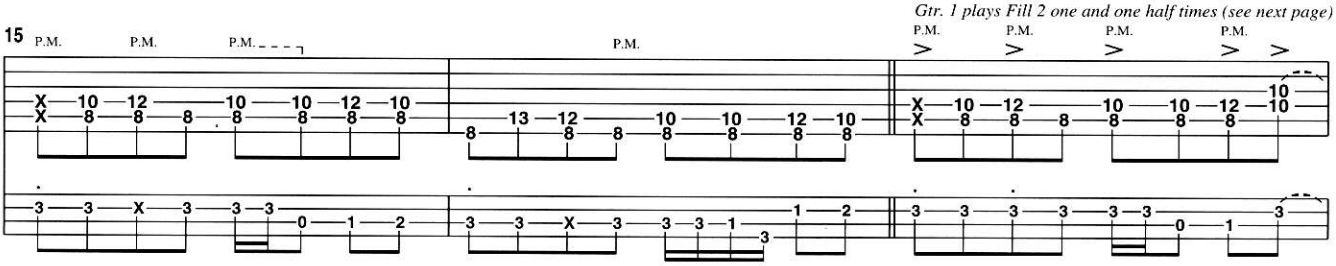
D **Chorus** (0:38, 1:16, 3:03)

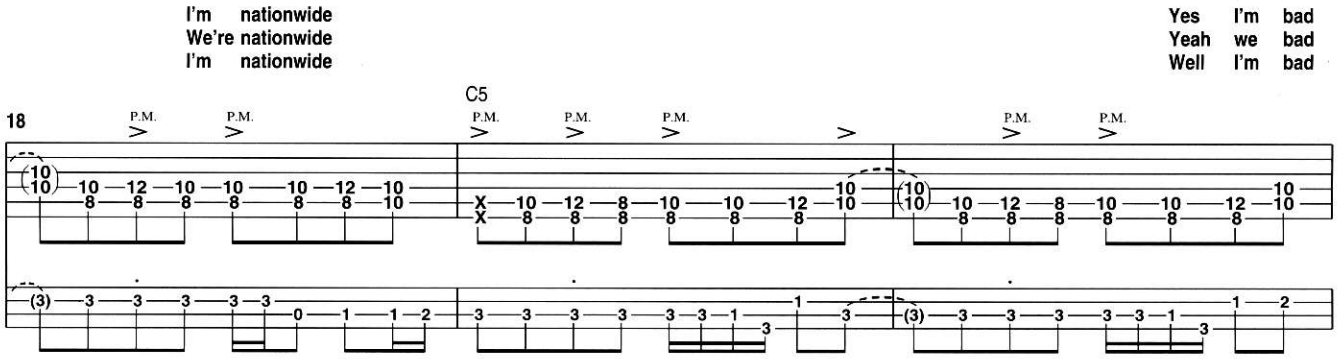
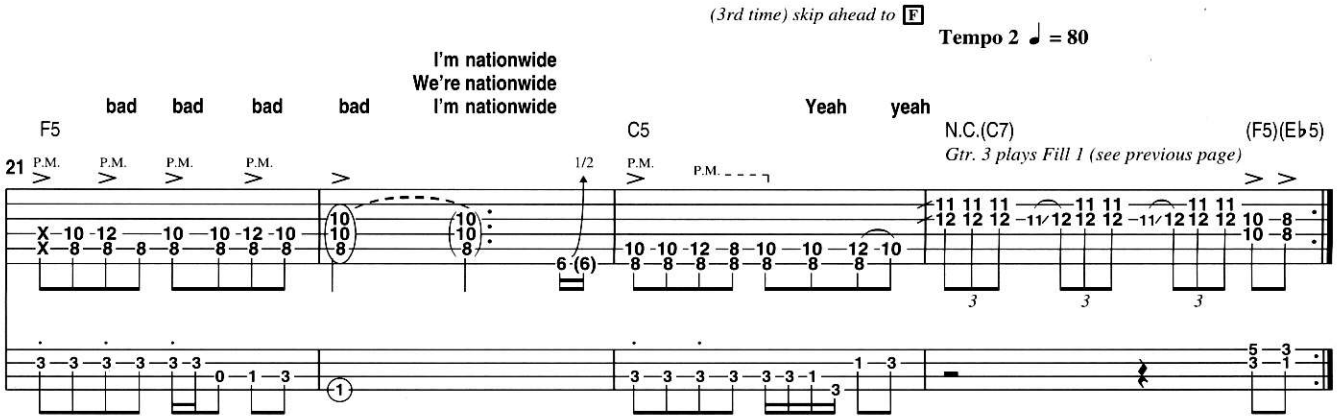
laughin' an' I'm jokin' and we feelin' all right Oh I'm bad
smokin' Lucky Strikes and wearin' nylons too 'Cause we bad
body give me trouble 'cause they know I got it made I'm bad

F5 C5

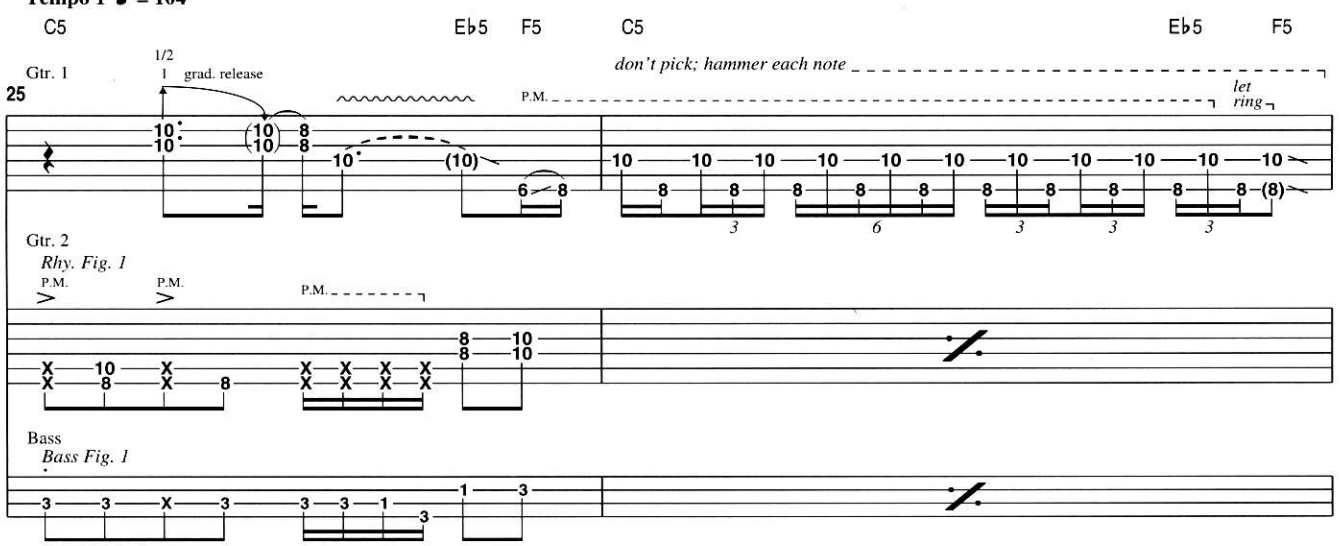
F5

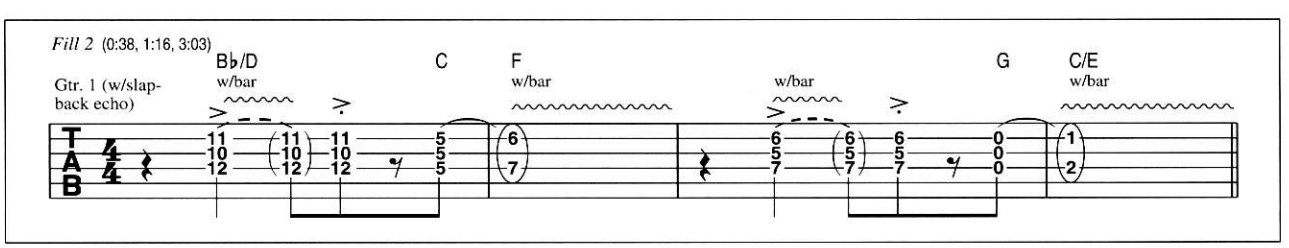
Gtr. 1 plays Fill 2 one and one half times (see next page)



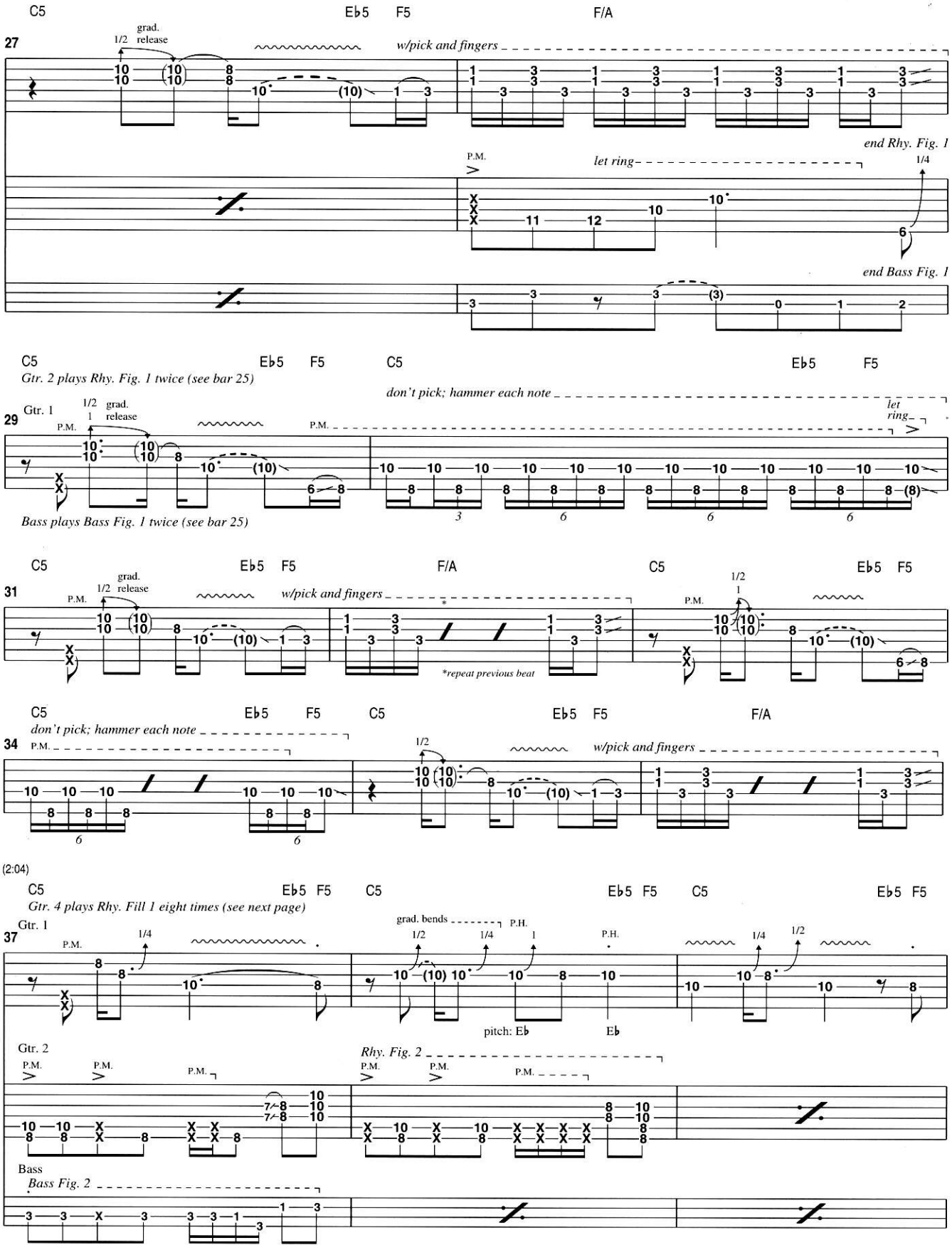


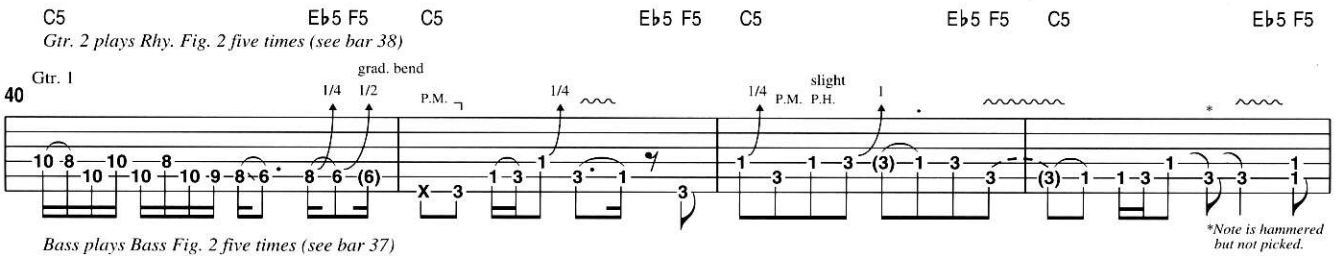
E **Guitar Solo** (1:36)

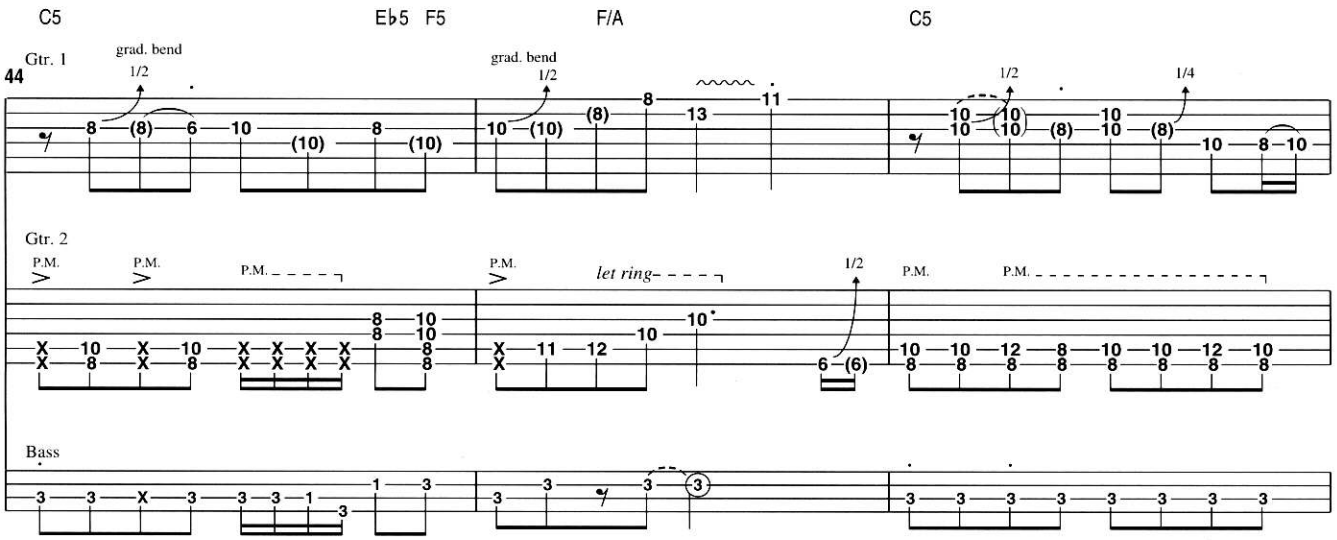


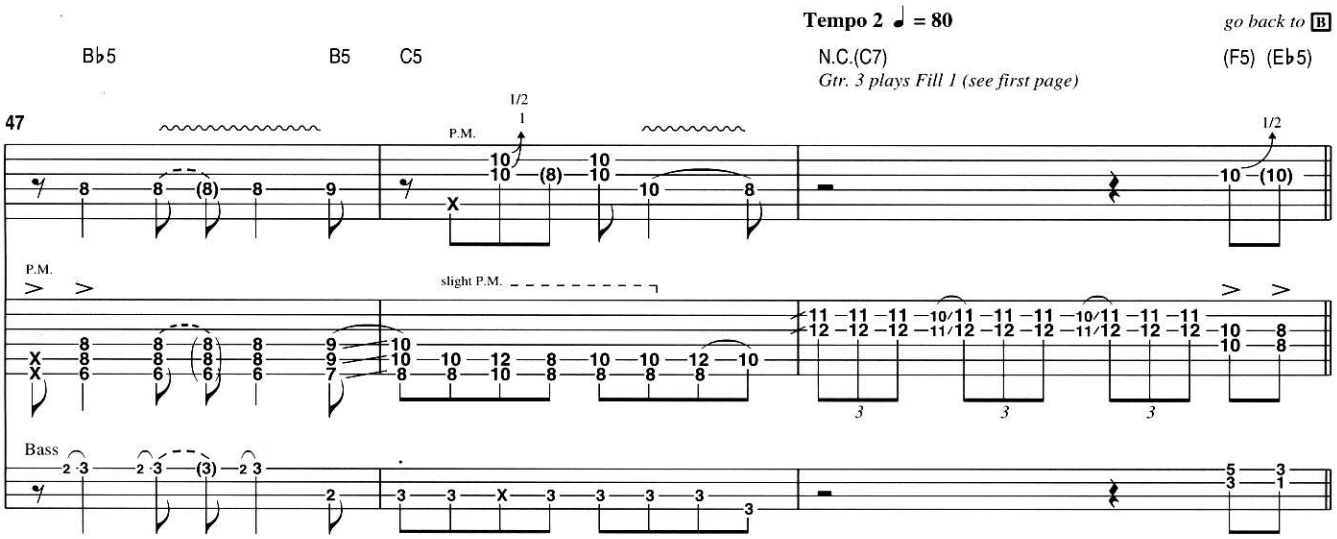


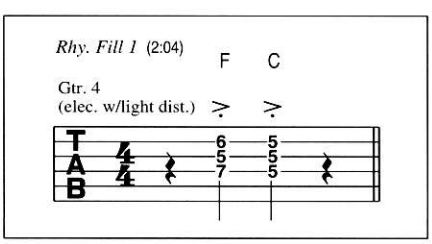
"I'M BAD, I'M NATIONWIDE"



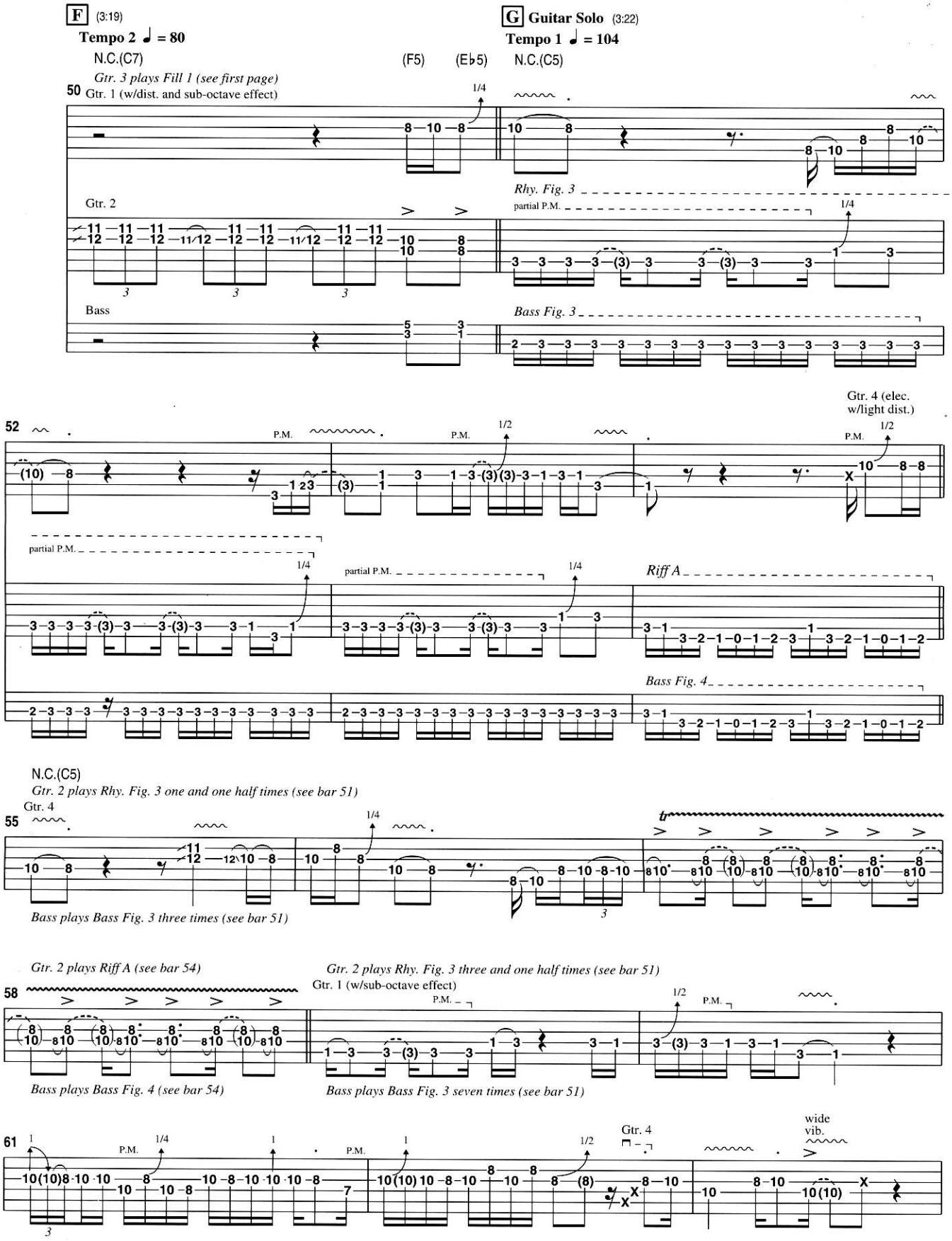

C5
Eb5 F5
C5
Eb5 F5
C5
Eb5 F5
C5
Eb5 F5
Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 2 five times (see bar 38)
Gtr. 1
40
grad. bend
1/4
1/2
P.M.
1/4
1/4
P.M.
slight
P.H.
1
Bass plays Bass Fig. 2 five times (see bar 37)
*Note is hammered but not picked.

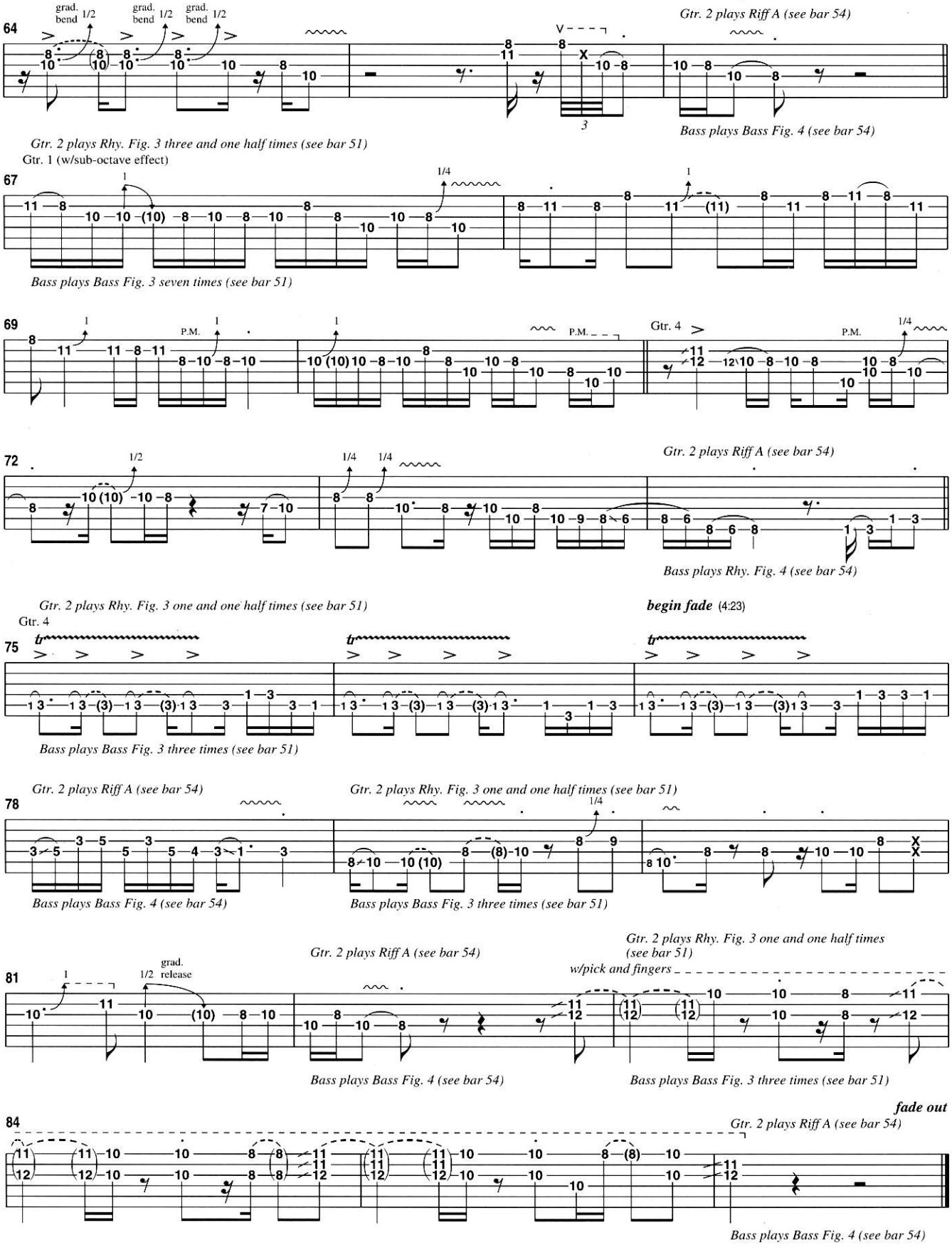

C5
Eb5 F5
F/A
C5
Gtr. 1
44
grad. bend
1/2
grad. bend
1/2
1/2
1/4
Gtr. 2
P.M.
P.M.
P.M.
P.M.
let ring
1/2
P.M.
P.M.
Bass


Tempo 2 ♩ = 80
go back to B
Bb5
B5
C5
N.C.(C7)
(F5) (Eb5)
Gtr. 3 plays Fill 1 (see first page)
47
1/2
1
P.M.
1/2
P.M.
slight P.M.
Bass


Rhy. Fill 1 (2:04)
F
C
Gtr. 4
(elec. w/light dist.)

"I'M BAD, I'M NATIONWIDE"



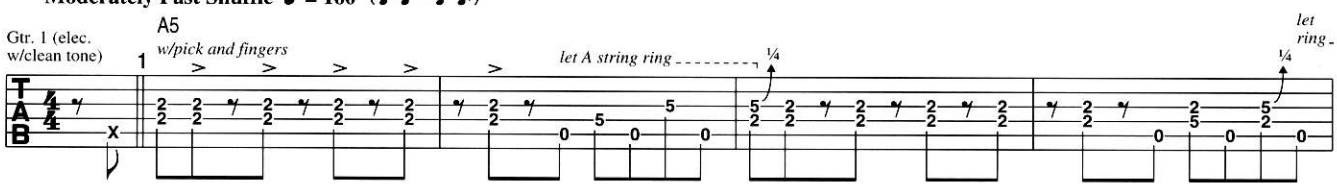

64
grad. bend 1/2
grad. bend 1/2
grad. bend 1/2
Gtr. 2 plays Riff A (see bar 54)
Bass plays Bass Fig. 4 (see bar 54)
Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 3 three and one half times (see bar 51)
Gtr. 1 (w/sub-octave effect)
67
Bass plays Bass Fig. 3 seven times (see bar 51)
69
Gtr. 4
P.M.
72
Gtr. 2 plays Riff A (see bar 54)
Bass plays Rhy. Fig. 4 (see bar 54)
Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 3 one and one half times (see bar 51)
begin fade (4:23)
Gtr. 4
75
Bass plays Bass Fig. 3 three times (see bar 51)
78
Gtr. 2 plays Riff A (see bar 54)
Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 3 one and one half times (see bar 51)
Bass plays Bass Fig. 4 (see bar 54)
Bass plays Bass Fig. 3 three times (see bar 51)
81
grad. release
Gtr. 2 plays Riff A (see bar 54)
Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 3 one and one half times (see bar 51)
w/pick and fingers
Bass plays Bass Fig. 4 (see bar 54)
Bass plays Bass Fig. 3 three times (see bar 51)
fade out
84
Gtr. 2 plays Riff A (see bar 54)
Bass plays Bass Fig. 4 (see bar 54)

"LA GRANGE"

As heard on **TRES HOMBRES** (WARNER BROS.)
Words and Music by **Billy F. Gibbons, Dusty Hill and Frank Beard** • *Transcribed by* **Andy Aledort**

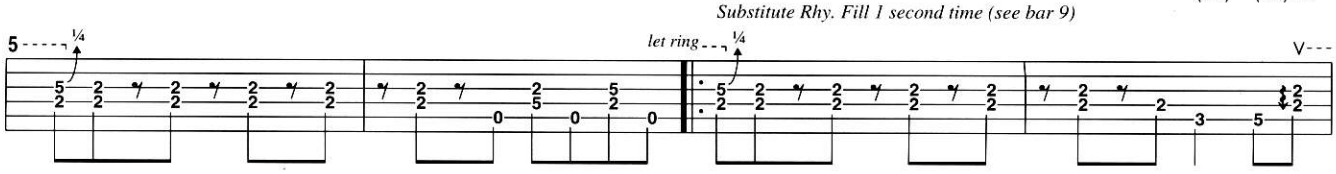
A **Intro** (0:00)

Moderately Fast Shuffle ♩ = 160 (♫ = ♩ ♪³)

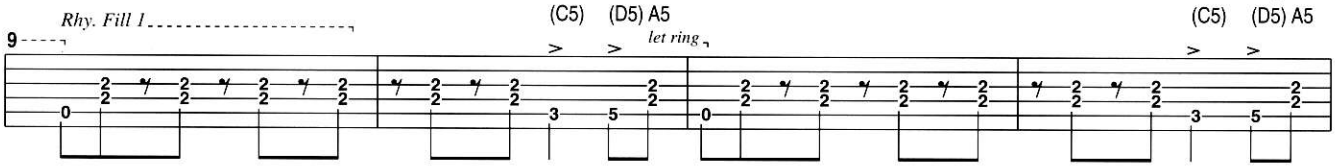


B **1st Verse** (0:09)

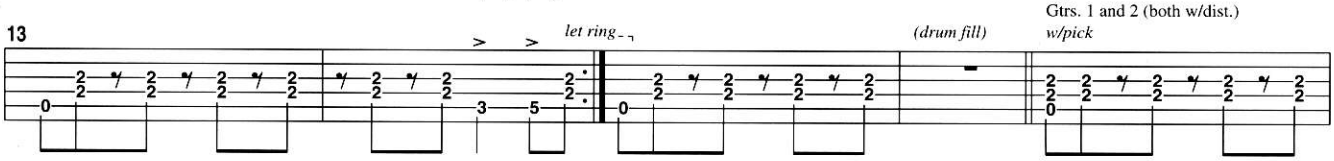
The rumor's spreadin' 'round in that Texas town
Just let me know if you wanna go
A5 (C5) (D5) A5
Substitute Rhy. Fill 1 second time (see bar 9)



to 'bout that shack outside on La Grange
that home out the range
(C5) (D5) A5 (C5) (D5) A5
Rhy. Fill 1

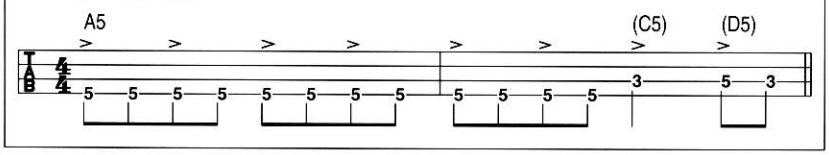


They got a lotta An' nice you know what I'm talkin' about girls ah
(C5) (D5) A5
(0:35)
A5
Gtrs. 1 and 2 (both w/dist.)
w/pick
(drum fill)



Bass plays Bass Fig. 1 four times (see below)

Bass Fig. 1 (0:35, 0:47)



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C **2nd Verse** (0:47)

Have mercy (2.) Uh heh how how how Uh well I uh heh
(3.) Uh how how how hear it's fine

(C5) (D5) A5 (C5) (D5) A5

Rhy. Fig. 1 *(play 3 times)*

let ring

18

Bass plays Bass Fig. 1 seven and one half times (see previous page)

if you've got the time and the ten to get
uh most every night but now I might

(C5) (D5) A5 (C5) (D5) A5

let ring

22

1. 2.

be yourself in uh hmm hmm And I hear it's tight Uh hmm hmm hmm
mistaken

(C5) (D5) A5 (C5) (D5) A5

let ring

26 *(drum fill)*

D **Guitar Solo** (1:11)

Have mercy

Gtr. 3 (elec. w/dist.) C5 E♭5 F5 C5 E♭5 F5

31 *let ring*

Gtrs. 1 and 2 *Rhy. Fig. 2* *(repeat previous two bars)*

Bass plays Bass Fig. 2 fifteen times (see below)

C5 E♭5 F5 C5 E♭5 F5

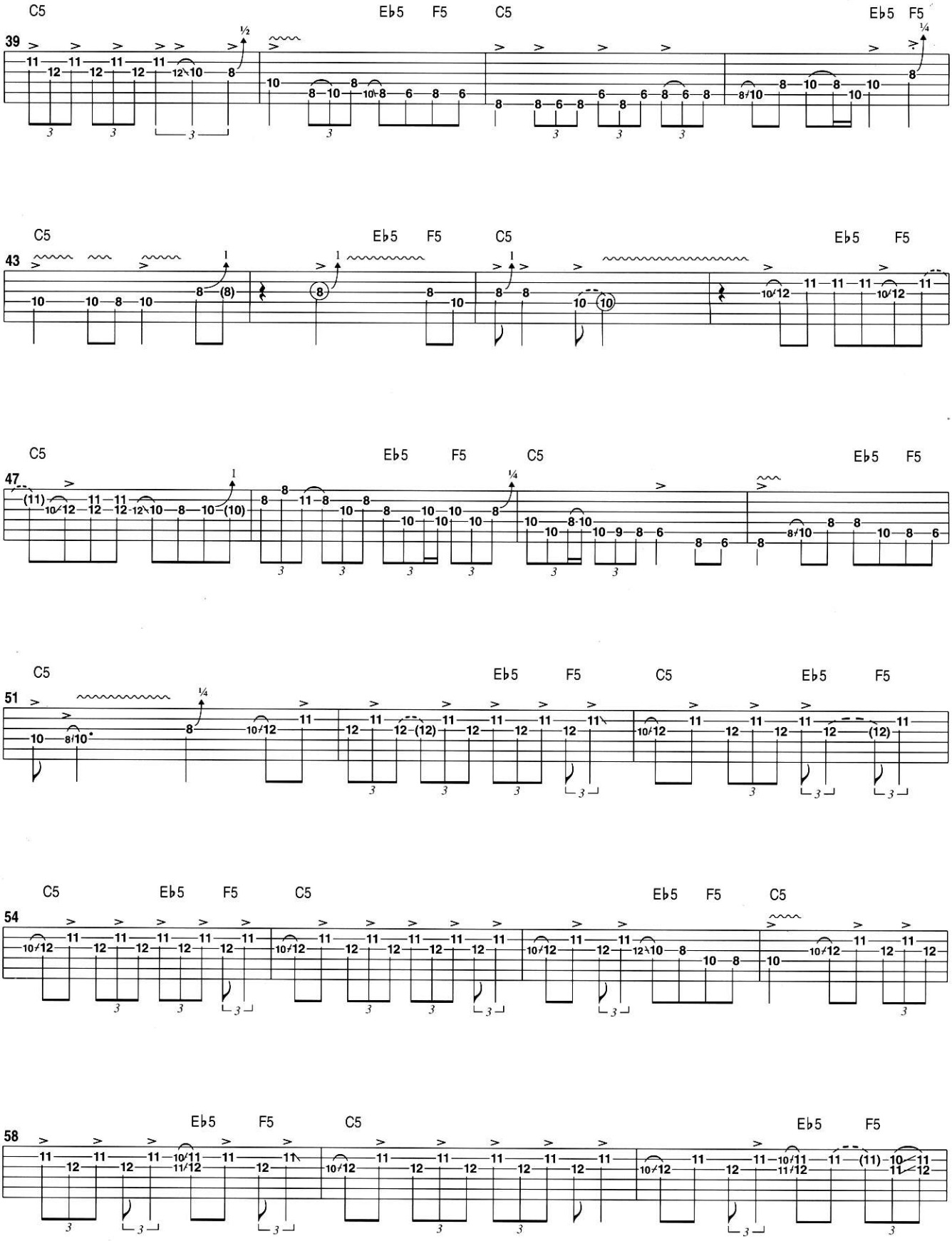
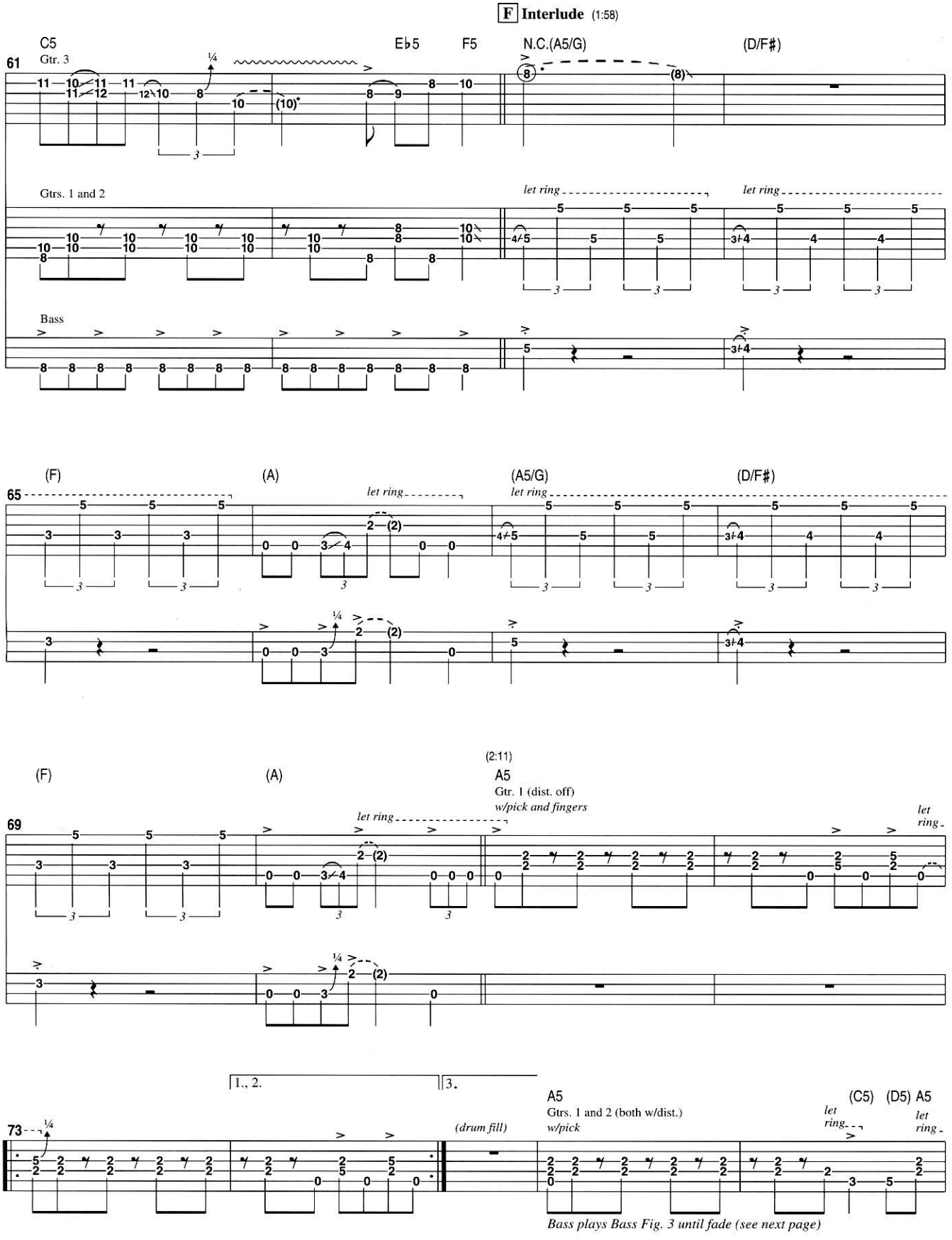
Gtrs. 1 and 2 play Rhy. Fig. 2 thirteen times (see bar 31)

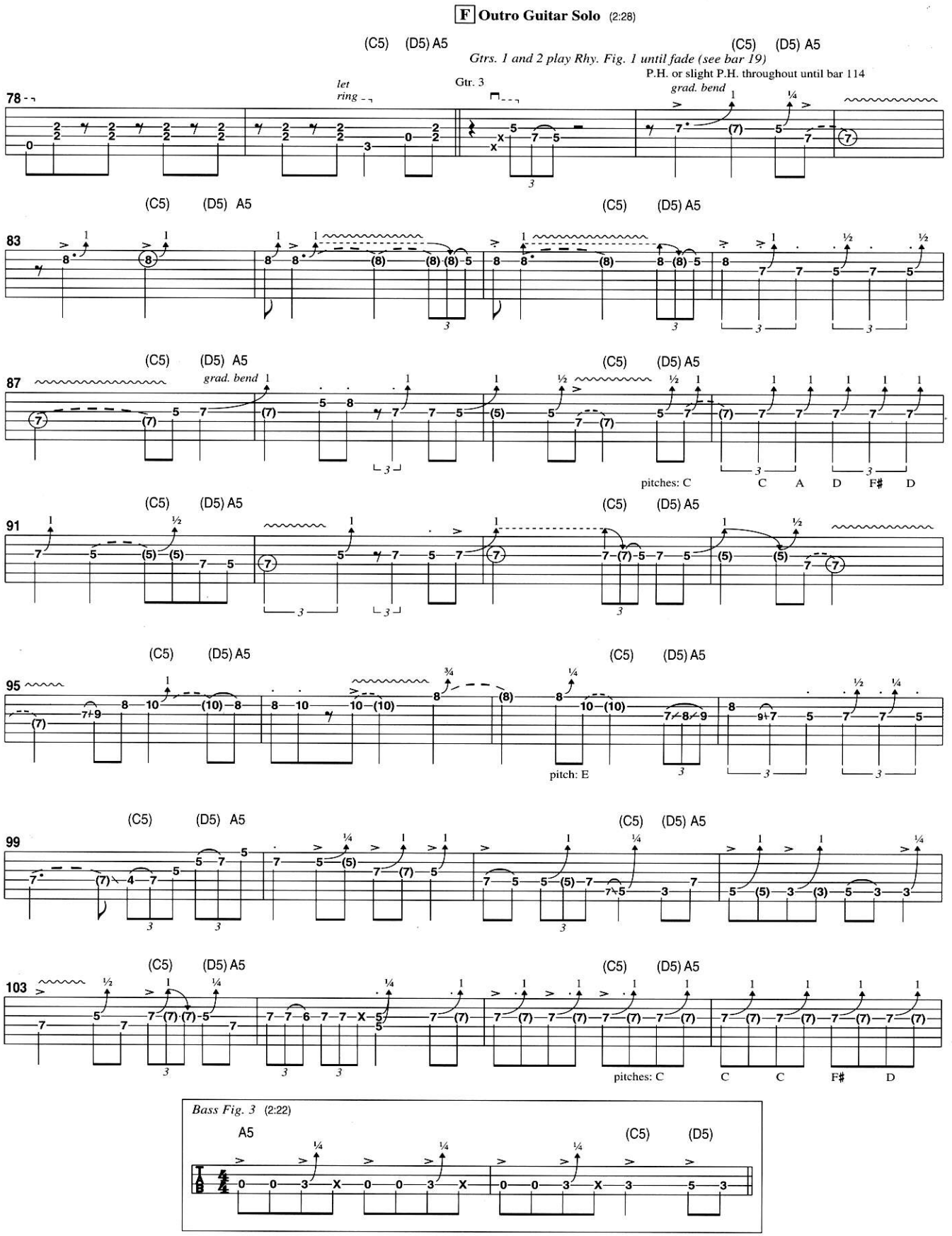
35

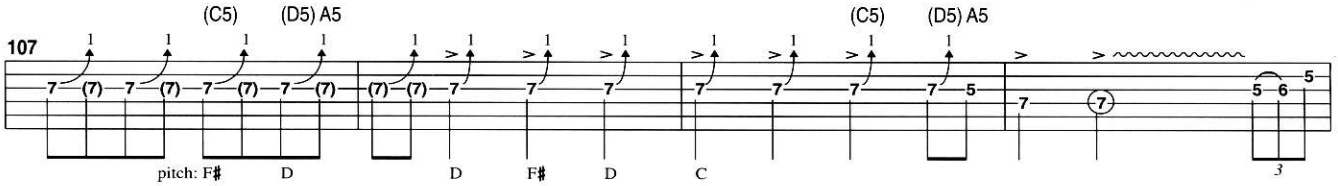
Bass Fig. 2 (1:11)

C5 E♭5 F5

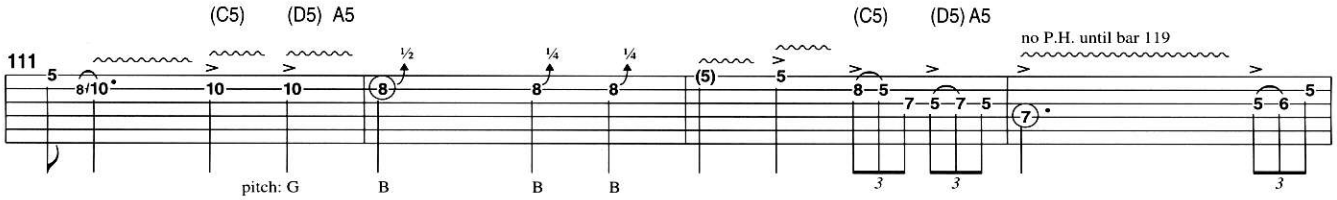
"LA GRANGE"

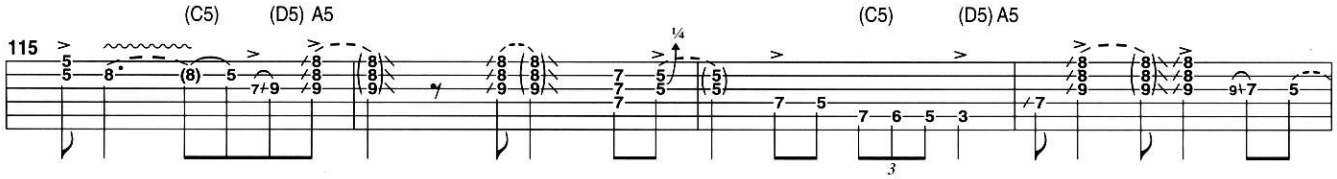


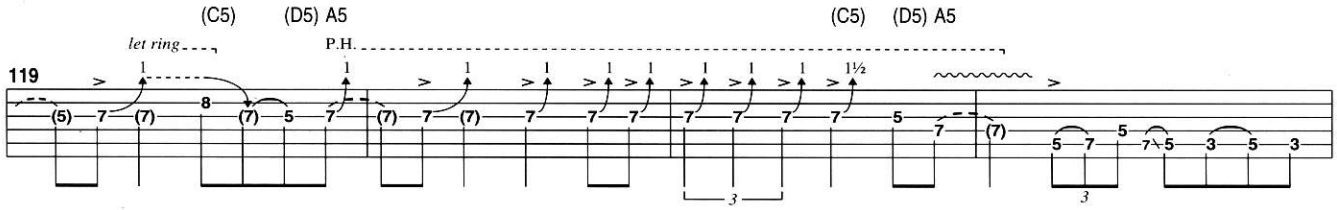
F Interlude (1:58)
C5
Gtr. 3
E♭5
F5
N.C.(A5/G)
(D/F♯)
61
Gtrs. 1 and 2
let ring
let ring
Bass
(F)
(A)
(A5/G)
(D/F♯)
65
let ring
let ring
(2:11)
A5
Gtr. 1 (dist. off)
w/pick and fingers
(F)
(A)
69
let ring
let ring
1., 2.
3.
A5
Gtrs. 1 and 2 (both w/dist.)
w/pick
(C5)
(D5)
A5
73
(drum fill)
let ring
let ring
Bass plays Bass Fig. 3 until fade (see next page)

F Outro Guitar Solo (2:28)
(C5) (D5) A5
Gtrs. 1 and 2 play Rhy. Fig. 1 until fade (see bar 19)
P.H. or slight P.H. throughout until bar 114
let ring
Gtr. 3
grad. bend
78
83
87
91
95
99
103
pitches: C C A D F# D
pitch: E
pitches: C C C F# D
Bass Fig. 3 (2:22)
A5
(C5) (D5)

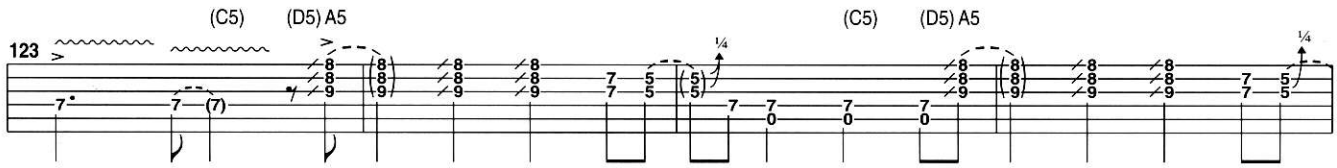


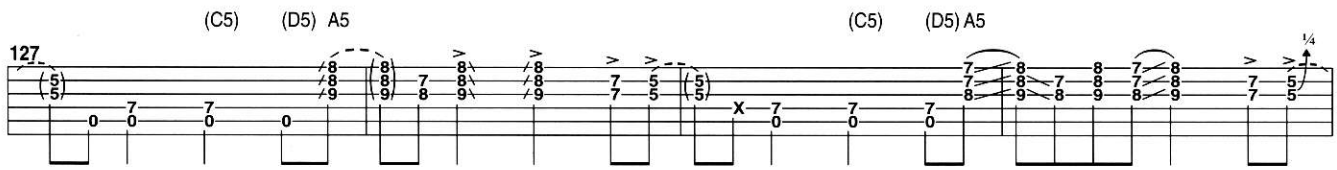
begin fade (3:19)



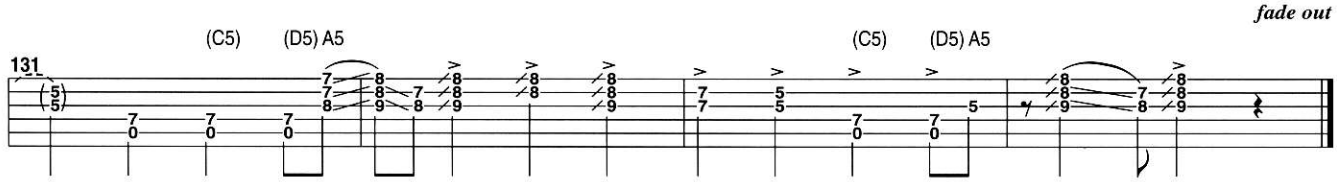








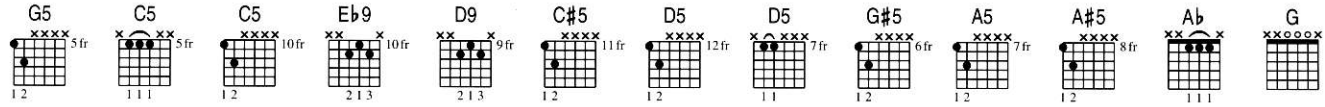
fade out



"TUSH"

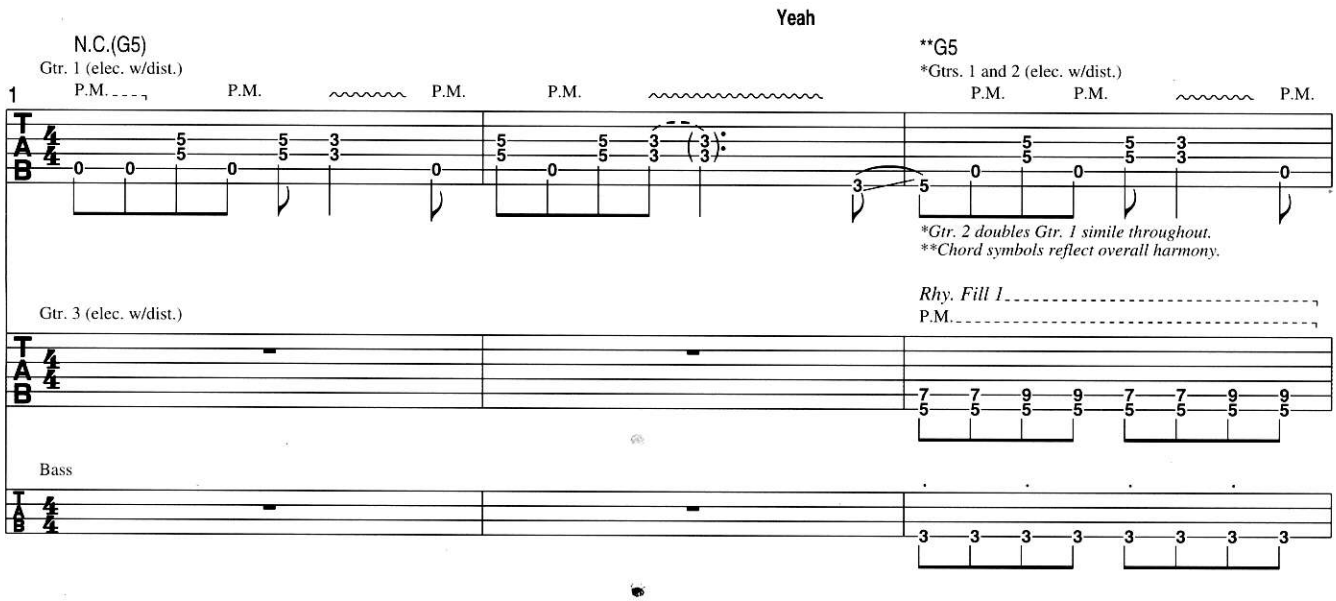
As heard on **FANDANGO!** (WARNER BROS.)
Words and Music by **Billy F. Gibbons, Dusty Hill and Frank Beard** • *Transcribed by* **Jeff Perrin**

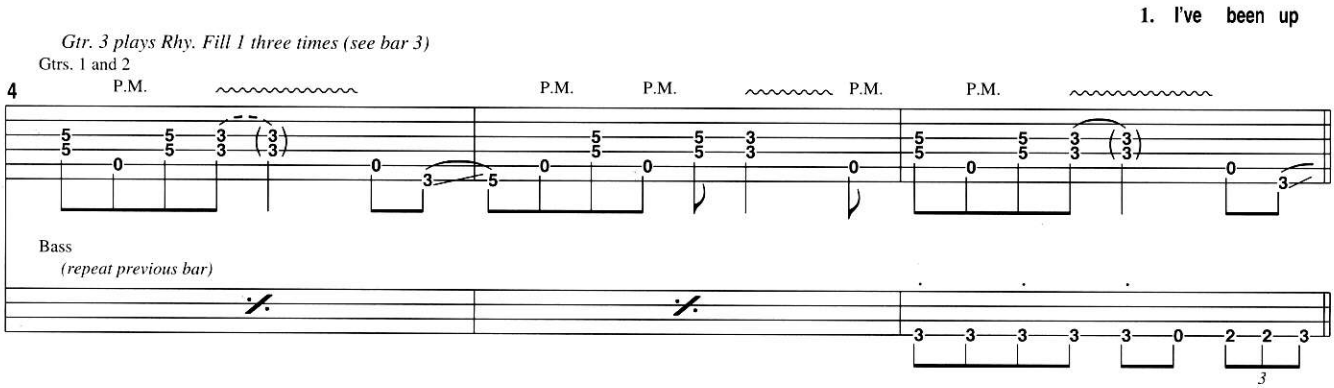
All guitars are in open G6 tuning (low to high: D G D G B E).

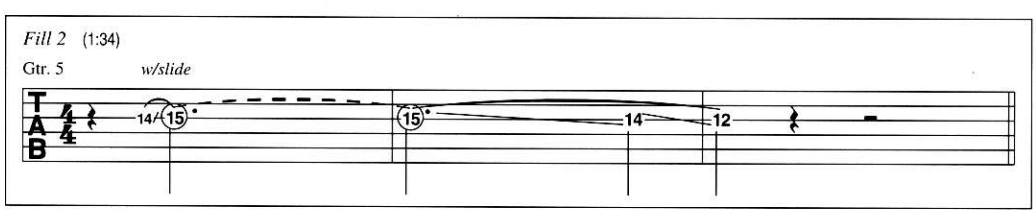


A Intro (0:00)

Moderately Fast Shuffle ♩ = 144 (♫ = ♩³♪)







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B **Verses** (0:10, 0:30, 1:29)

(1.) I've been down — Take my word — my way 'round
(2.) I've been good — Dallas Texas — Hollywood
(3.) way back home — Not by myself — not alone

Gtrs. 1 and 2 — G5
Gtr. 3 plays Rhy. Fill 1 four times (see bar 3)
Gtr. 5 plays Fill 2 third time (see previous page)
7
P.M.
Bass — *Bass Fig. 1*

I ain't askin' for much — Hmm — I said Lord

C5 — G5
Gtr. 1 — Gtrs. 1 and 2
11
P.M. — light P.M. — P.M.
Gtrs. 2 and 3 — Gtr. 3
Bass

3rd time, skip ahead to **D**

take me downtown — I'm just lookin' for some tush — 2. I've been bad

D5 — C5 — G5 — D9(no3)
Gtr. 1 substitutes Rhy. Fill 3 third time (see below)
Gtr. 5 plays Fill 1 second time (see below)
Gtr. 4 plays Rhy. Fill 2 (see below)
15
P.M.
*Note in parenthesis played first time only.
end Bass Fig. 1

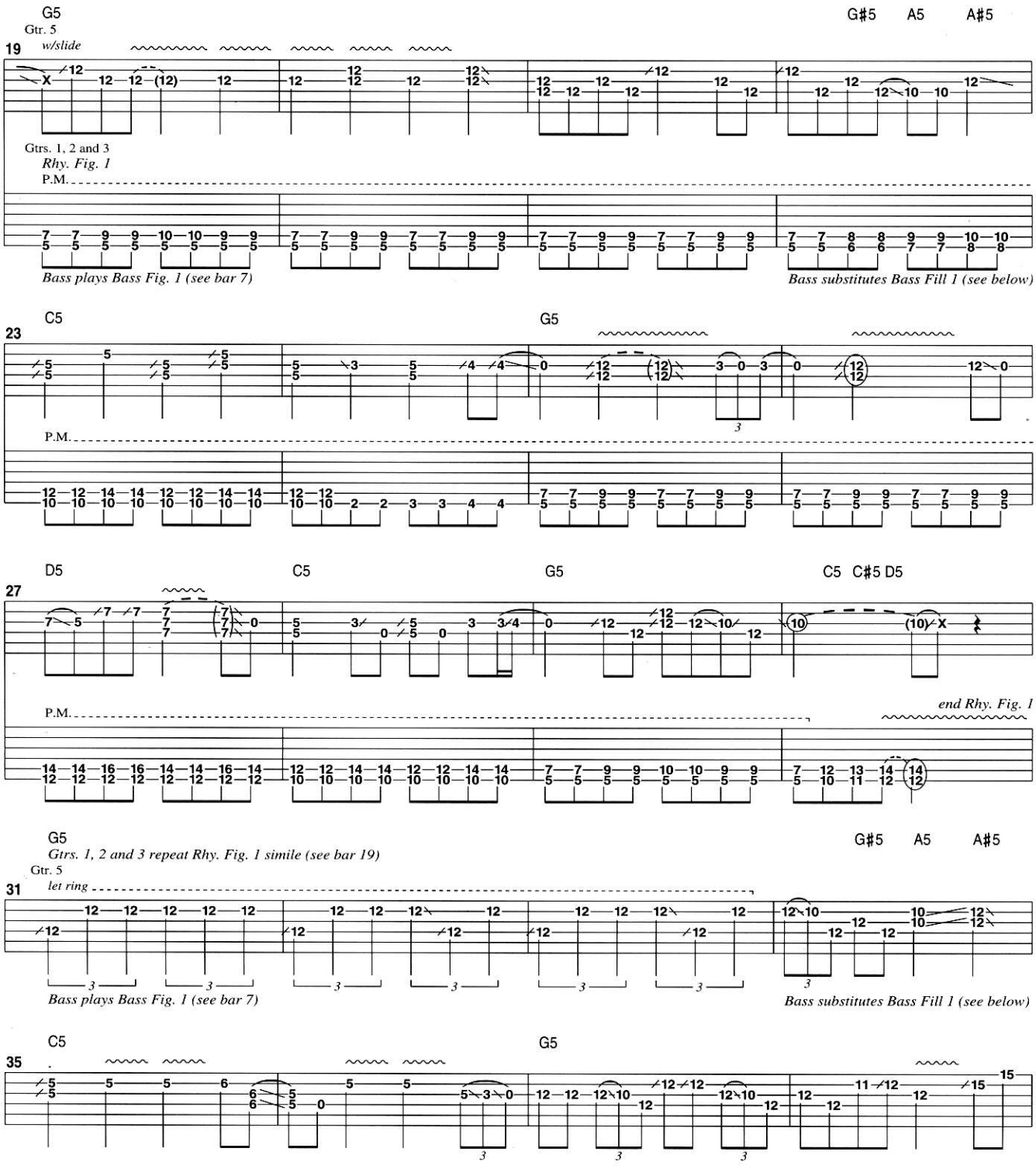
Rhy. Fill 2 (0:28, 0:48, 1:28)
Gtr. 4 (elec. w/light dist.) — E♭9 D9

Fill 1 (0:46)
Gtr. 5 (elec. w/dist.)
w/slide
*random fretboard locations

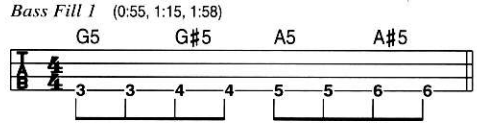
Rhy. Fill 3 (1:46)
Gtr. 1
P.M.

"TUSH"

C Guitar Solo (0:50)



Bass Fill 1 (0:55, 1:15, 1:58)



go back to **B** *Verse*

3. Take me back

D5 C5 G5 C5 C♯5 D5

Gtr. 4 plays Rhy. Fill 2 (see 2nd page)

39

D (1:48)

G5

Gtrs. 2 and 3 play Rhy. Fill 4 (see below)

E **Outro Guitar Solo** (1:49)

G5

Gtrs. 1, 2 and 3 play Rhy. Fig. 1 simile (see bar 19)

43 Gtr. 5

Bass plays Bass Fill 2 (see below)

**Slide past the highest point of the fingerboard.*

Bass plays Bass Fig. 1 (see bar 7)

Gtr. 5 G♯5 A5 A♯5 C5 G5

47

Bass substitutes Bass Fill 1 (see previous page)

D5 C5

51

G5 A♭ G

54 Gtr. 5

Gtrs. 1, 2 and 3

Bass

Rhy. Fill 4 (1:48)

Gtrs. 2 and 3

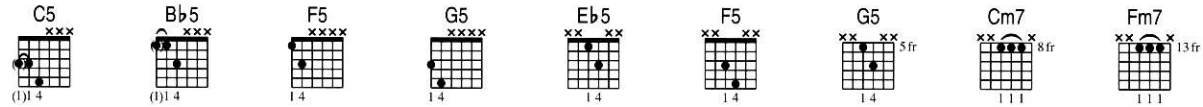
G5

Bass Fill 2 (1:48)

"SHARP DRESSED MAN"

As heard on **ELIMINATOR** (WARNER BROS.)
Words and Music by **Billy F. Gibbons, Dusty Hill and Frank Beard** • *Transcribed by* **Dale Turner and Andy Aledort**

Gtrs. 1, 2 and 4 are in standard tuning.
Gtr. 3 (slide) is in open E tuning (low to high: E B E G♯ B E).



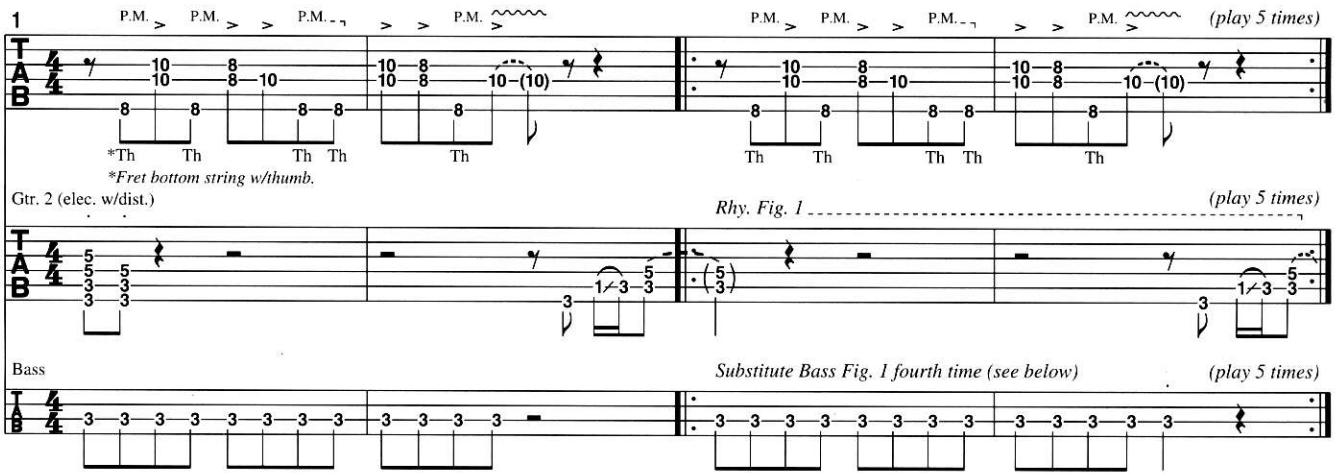
A Intro (0:00)

Moderately ♩ = 125

(C5)

Gtr. 1 (elec. w/dist.)

w/pick and fingers throughout

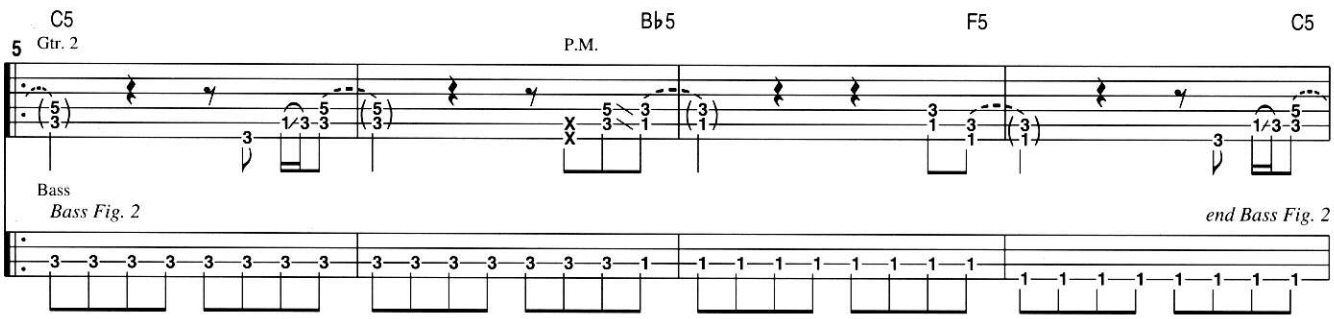


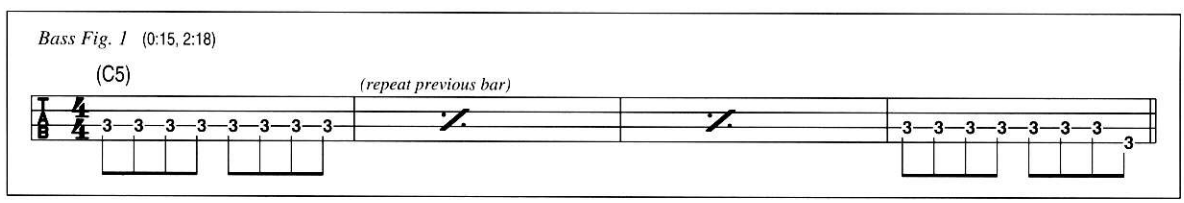
Gtr. 2 (elec. w/dist.)

Bass

B Verses (0:23, 0:54, 2:26)

1. Clean shirt — New shoes — And I don't know where I am goin' to
2. Gold watch — Diamond ring — I ain't missin' not a single thing
3. Top coat — and top hat — And I don't worry 'cause my wallet's fat





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Silk suit Black tie (Black tie) I don't need a reason why
Cuff links Stick pin When I step out I'm gonna do you in
Black shades White gloves Lookin' sharp and lookin' for love

B♭5 F5 G5

9 Gtr. 2 P.M. *rake*

Bass repeats Bass Fig. 2 (see bar 5)

3rd time, skip ahead to D *Outro Guitar Solo*

They come runnin' just as fast as they can 'Cause every girl's crazy 'bout a sharp dressed man

F5 G5 B♭5 C5 E♭5 B♭5

Gtr. 2 substitutes Rhy. Fill 1 on 3rd Verse (see below)

Gtr. 1 plays Fill 1 on 1st Verse (see below)
Gtr. 3 plays Fill 2 on 2nd Verse (see below)
Gtr. 1 plays Fill 3 on 3rd Verse (see below)

13 Gtr. 2 *rake*

Bass

1. C5 *go back to* B *Verse*

Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 1 twice (see bar 3)

17 Gtr. 1 *(repeat previous two bars)* 2

Th Th Th Th

Bass plays Bass Fig. 1 (see previous page)

2. C **Guitar Solo** (1:17)

C5

Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 2 nineteen times (see below)

Gtr. 3 *fingerstyle; w/slide* *grad. slide* *let ring*

21 *

**repeat previous chord*

Bass plays Bass Fig. 3 nineteen times (see below)

Fill 1 (0:44) Gtr. 1

Fill 2 (1:15) Gtr. 3 (elec. w/dist.) *fingerstyle; w/slide*

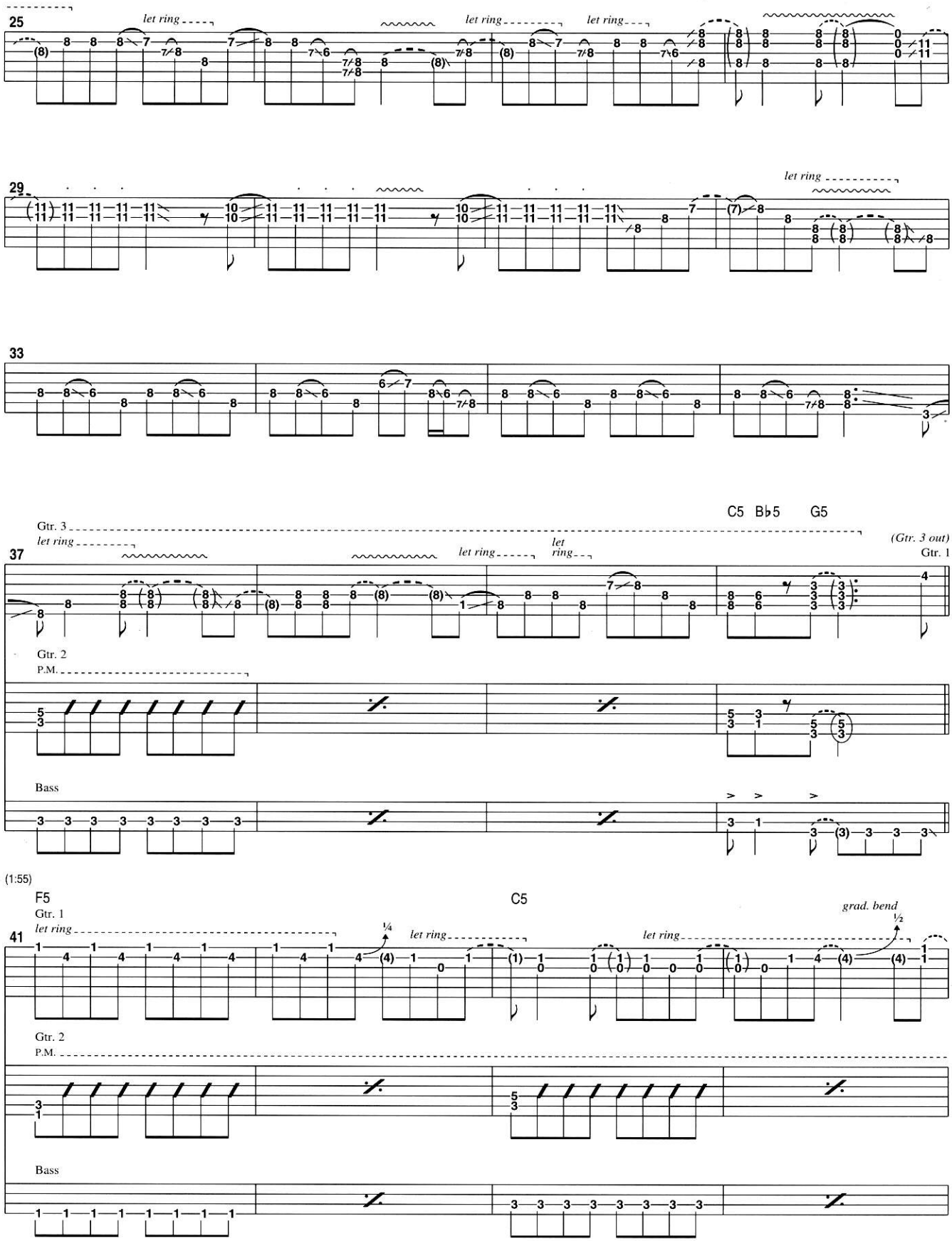
Fill 3 (2:47) Gtr. 1 *grad. bend*

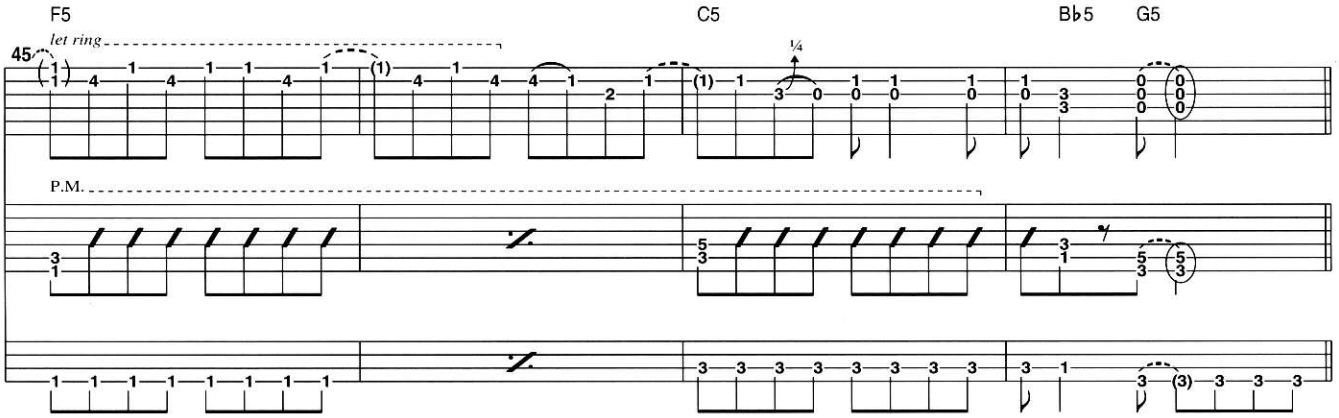
Rhy. Fig. 2 (1:17) C5 Gtr. 2 P.M.

Bass Fig. 3 (1:17, 2:49, 3:35, 3:51, 4:06) (C5)

Rhy. Fill 1 (2:41) G5 F5 G5 B♭5 C5 Gtr. 2 *rake*

"SHARP DRESSED MAN"



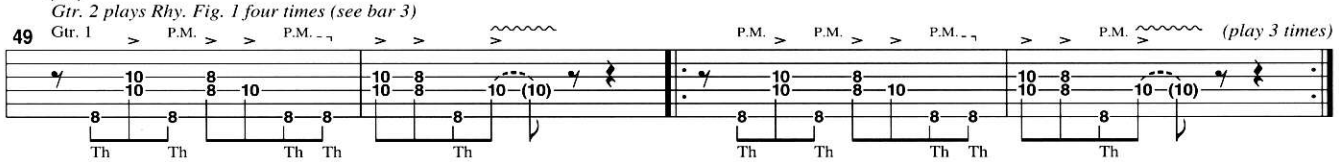


(2:11)

(C5)

Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 1 four times (see bar 3)

3rd time, go back to **B** *Verse*



Bass plays Bass Fill 1 (see below)

Bass plays Bass Fig. 1 second time (see 1st page)

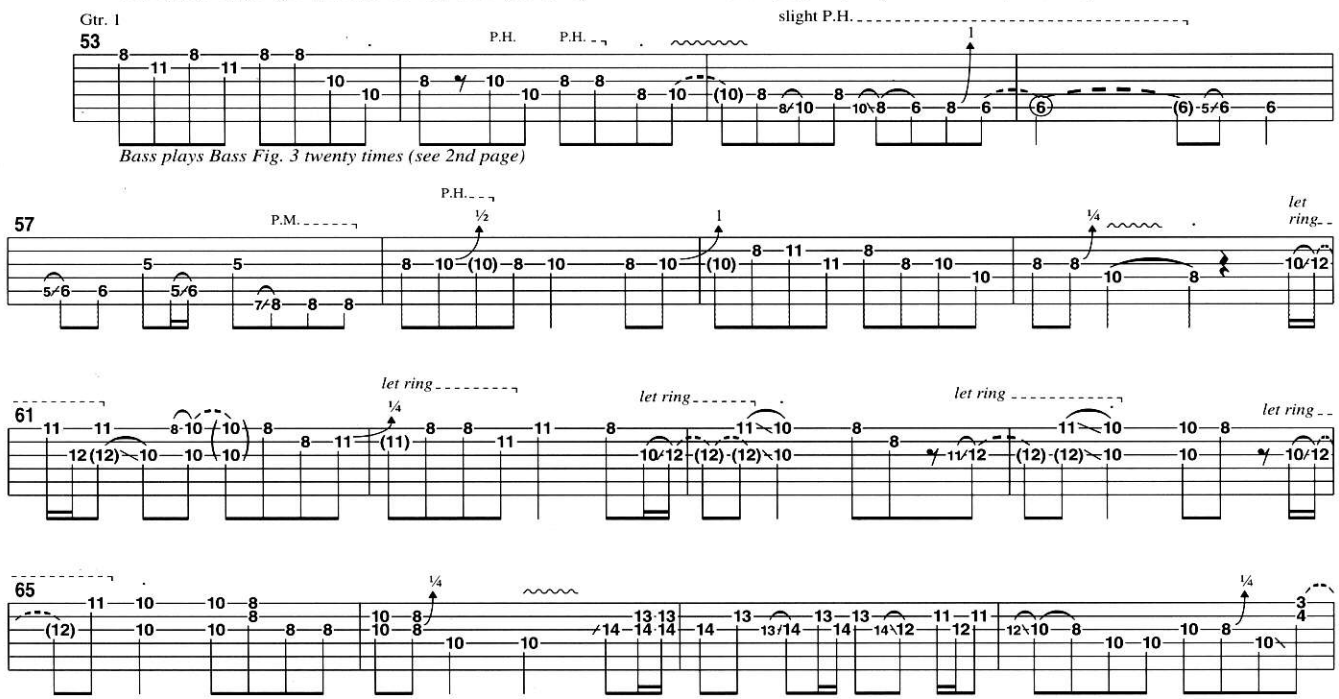
D **Outro Guitar Solo** (2:49)

C5

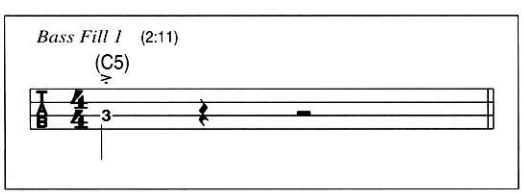
Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 1 nine and one half times (see bar 3)

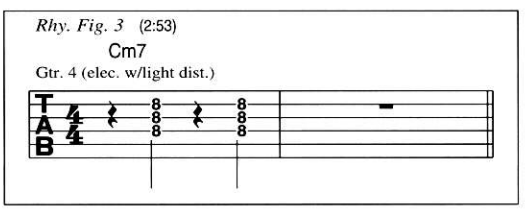
Cm7

Gtr. 4 plays Rhy. Fig. 3 nine times (see below)



Bass plays Bass Fig. 3 twenty times (see 2nd page)





"SHARP DRESSED MAN"

Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fill 2 (see below)

69

(3:27) Fm7

Gtr. 1 *Gtr. 4 plays Rhy. Fig. 4a twice (see below)*

let ring throughout

73

Gtr. 2 *Rhy. Fig. 4* *end Rhy. Fig. 4*

Bass plays Bass Fig. 4 four times (see below)

Cm7

Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 1 one and one half times (see bar 3); Gtr. 4 plays Rhy. Fig. 3 twice (see previous page) *Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fill 2 (see below)*

77 Gtr. 1

Bass plays Bass Fig. 3 four times (see 2nd page)

Fm7

Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 4 (see bar 73); Gtr. 4 plays Rhy. Fig. 4a twice (see below)

81

Bass plays Bass Fig. 4 four times (see below)

Cm7

Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 1 one and one half times (see bar 3); Gtr. 4 plays Rhy. Fig. 3 twice (see previous page) *Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fill 2 (see below)*

85

Bass plays Bass Fig. 3 four times (see 2nd page)

begin fade (3:58)

Fm7

Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 4 (see bar 73); Gtr. 4 plays Rhy. Fig. 4a twice (see below)

89

Bass plays Bass Fig. 4 four times (see below)

Cm7 ***fade out***

Gtr. 2 plays Rhy. Fig. 1 twice (see bar 3); Gtr. 4 plays Rhy. Fig. 3 twice (see previous page)

93

Bass plays Bass Fig. 3 four times (see second page)

Rhy. Fill 2 (3:25, 3:41, 3:56)

Gtr. 2 (C5) (F5)

Rhy. Fig. 4a (3:27, 3:43, 3:58)

Gtr. 4 Fm7

Bass Fig. 4 (3:27, 3:43, 3:58)

(Fm7)

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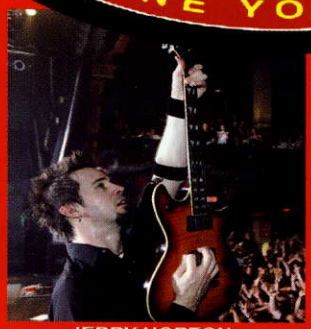

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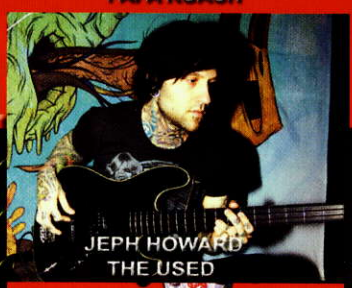

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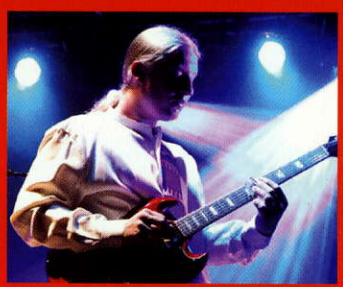
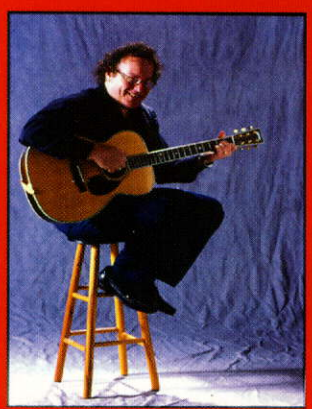


DEREK TRUCKS
ALLMAN BROTHERS
DEREK TRUCKS BAND



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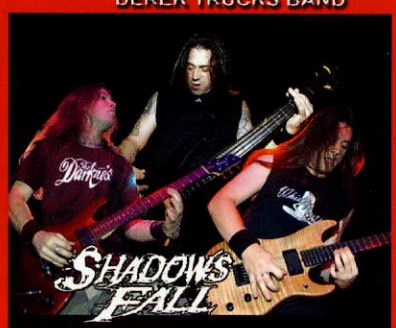

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